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ABSTRACT

TEACHING REFLECTIVE SCRIPTURE READING IN THE  
CONTEXT OF SMALL GROUPS IN THE WALLA  
WALLA UNIVERSITY CHURCH

by

Emily M. Whitney

Adviser: Allan Walshe

## ABSTRACT OF GRADUATE STUDENT RESEARCH

Project Document

Andrews University

Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary

Title: TEACHING REFLECTIVE SCRIPTURE READING IN THE CONTEXT OF  
SMALL GROUPS IN THE WALLA WALLA UNIVERSITY CHURCH

Name of researcher: Emily M. Whitney

Name and degree of faculty adviser: Allan Walshe, DMin

Date completed: August 2017

### Problem

While the Seventh-day Adventist Church has emphasized the importance of God's Word and is effective in teaching people how to search Scripture for doctrinal truth, many disciples are not spending significant time in Scripture or growing in relationship with God. This lack of formational Scripture reading is due to numerous challenges that can discourage people from spending time in God's Word. A primary challenge is that many people confess that they do not know how to read Scripture for relationship with God; they long to know how to read Scripture to hear from God and relevantly and meaningfully apply Scripture to their daily lives. This demonstrates a great opportunity in the church to further disciple people, teaching them how to abide in Jesus and His Word. This need has been seen in the Walla Walla University Church as

many expressed a desire for deeper experiences in God's Word. Therefore, it became apparent that a resource was needed to disciple members in the practice of reflecting on Scripture.

### Methods

An eight-week Scripture reflection curriculum was developed and two pilot groups conducted with the intent of discipling participants in abiding with Jesus and His Word. Because God and Scripture are relational and communal, the Scripture reflection curriculum was intentionally implemented in a small group context. The interplay of personal and communal Scripture reflection practice is characterized as significant and interdependent "sacred spaces" that lead to deepening faith formation. An experiential learning model was used to engage participants in relationship with other growing disciples. Each week a Scripture reflection practice was introduced, taught, and experienced both personally and communally. The emphasis of these practices was to savor small portions of Scripture until the Holy Spirit brings it to life in one's heart and mind. Time for discussion and prayer together was integral to the group process and community connection developed. After the conclusion of the two pilot groups, focus groups were conducted to assess the impact of the Scripture reflection practices, and the small group community experience in the lives of the participants.

### Results

Nine women enrolled in the first pilot group and continued throughout the eight-week group. The second group included 10 members, both men and women. Assessing their own experiences in the pilot groups, members expressed various significant benefits

from the Scripture reflection practices experienced that led to a deepening relationship with God and His Word. All members expressed appreciation for the small group community context, and felt that reading and experiencing Scripture together with other disciples was meaningful and resulted in a closer connection with one another. While it was hoped that there would be further implementation of these groups and curriculum, this project did not include a way to mentor and develop new leaders or additional groups. However, as demonstrated in the focus groups, a natural result of meaningful time in God's Word is the desire to share it with others. Subsequently, a member from one of the pilot groups started and led two additional Scripture reflection groups, utilizing the curriculum and material developed for this project. There are also plans in place for implementation of additional groups.

### Conclusions

Jesus called his disciples into a faith-forming community, where they lived the spiritual life together, challenging and strengthening each other as they each grew in a deeper relationship with Jesus himself. This call continues today. Significant obstacles exist that threaten this ideal, and few resources are available to help disciples experience Scripture and the God of Scripture more deeply. However, this project demonstrated that meaningful spiritual growth can take place in the lives of individual disciples by spending time reflecting on Scripture rather than reading for information alone and when done within a supportive, spiritual community this leads to an on-going faith formation. As a result of this project process, it is evident that further implementation of the curriculum developed would be a beneficial discipleship resource in the local church.

Andrews University  
Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary

TEACHING REFLECTIVE SCRIPTURE READING IN THE  
CONTEXT OF SMALL GROUPS IN THE WALLA  
WALLA UNIVERSITY CHURCH

A Project Document  
Presented in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Doctor of Ministry

by  
Emily M. Whitney

August 2017

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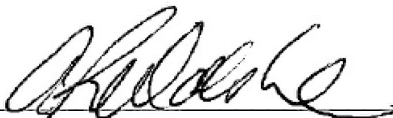
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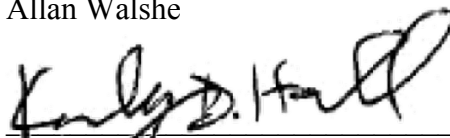
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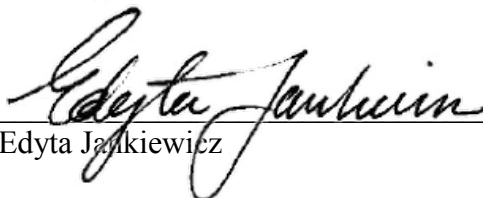
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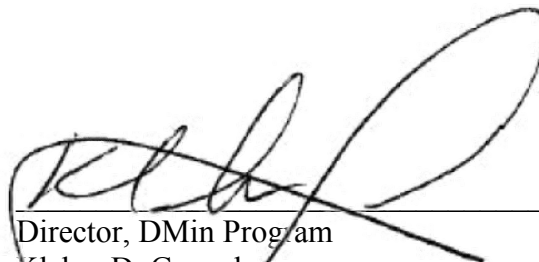
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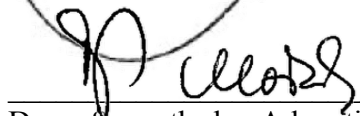
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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

#### **Personal History**

I was raised by a mother who was a devoted follower of Jesus and a life-long Seventh-day Adventist. I often found her quietly praying, reading, and meditating on Scripture. By her example and instruction, my mother instilled in me a love of Jesus and a deep appreciation of Scripture. She taught me that God was a personal God who desired a relationship with me. My mother implanted in me a foundational belief that reading Scripture was about meeting with God and that the Spirit of God, through the pages of Scripture, has the power to speak to me, guide me, and change me.

I fell in love with the Word of God at an early age, and God's Word has continued to be my foundation, support, and source of strength. Through times of turbulent change and heart-breaking loss, God's Word has been a comfort and a stabilizing security. In times of darkness and uncertainty, God's Word has been a guiding light. When wrestling with fear and anxiety, God's Word has been a shield of protection. Because I have personally experienced the power and presence of God through Scripture, it is my desire that others would find such life-giving, life-impacting, transformative experiences in the Word of God. It is my hope that all would experience God speaking into their lives and experience the resulting peace, hope, and love.



Throughout my ministry a common thread has run through many conversations with many members in different congregations across the country. These numerous Seventh-day Adventist church members have described a sense of lack in their experience in Scripture and a desire for more depth and connection with God and Scripture. Many have described dissatisfaction with cognitive methods of Bible study that approach God and Scripture as a subject to master rather than a relationship to experience. These conversations have resulted in the growing realization that there is a need in the church for intentional discipleship, helping people to know how to reflect on Scripture, not just to obtain information but to experience formative relationship with the God of Scripture.

My personal connection with God through Scripture and the sense of need in the Seventh-day Adventist Church for a relational approach to Scripture has given my ministry new vision and focus. Through this Doctor of Ministry program and the project process, my passion for teaching people to spend time in Scripture has grown. I have come to discover that my life calling is to create space for people to experience the relational and formative power of God's voice and presence through Scripture. Therefore, this focus has become central in my ministry and has transformed how I approach facilitating Bible studies, spiritual retreats, counseling, sermons, and all else that I do. As a result, I have witnessed time and again the formative power of God through Scripture, and it has reaffirmed to me the importance of discipling people in reading and reflecting on Scripture for relationship with God. It is from these experiences and convictions that I developed and implemented this project.

### **Purpose**

The goal of this project is to help teach people how to read and reflect on Scripture for relationship with God rather than studying Scripture for information about God. Scripture

reflection curriculum was developed and implemented within the context of small groups with the intent of providing supportive spiritual community in which members could together experience the Word of God in their lives. With this in mind, an eight-week Scripture reflection curriculum was developed and two pilot groups were facilitated in the Walla Walla University Church. This project is based on the belief that as people spend time learning new ways to read and reflect on Scripture they will have deeper and more meaningful experiences in Scripture, they will sense God's Word being spoken into their lives, and they will grow in their relationship with Jesus. Further, as group members engage in discipleship community they will experience encouragement, vulnerability, accountability, and growing relationships that will continue to benefit the discipleship process.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Pastoral observation suggests that many Seventh-day Adventist church members, while being faithful in church attendance, involved in church programs, and claiming to be "people of the book," do not spend daily or consistent time in the Word of God. In an interview for *Ministry Magazine*, revivalist L. Venden said that surveys he has conducted "indicate that less than twenty-five percent of Adventist church-attending members spend any personal time each day seeking to become better acquainted with God through His Word and prayer" (cited in Morris, 2012, pp. 6-7). Pastoral observation suggests that a contributing factor to the lack of personal Bible reading for relationship with God is that too many Seventh-day Adventist believers have not been disciplined in this practice. Venden attests, "We have discovered that Adventists everywhere are hungering for Jesus and long to know how to have a personal friendship with Him that is tangible and life changing." Venden goes on to say "most of those we meet are thirsting for clear, practical instruction on how to experience a meaningful relationship with Christ" (pp. 6-7). Moreover, Barna research

affirms that the lack of effective discipleship is partly a church problem. “Most Christians know that spiritual growth is important, personally beneficial and expected but few attend churches that push them to grow or provide the resources necessary to facilitate that growth.” The Barna report goes on to explain, “Churches have done a good job of promoting the importance of spiritual maturity but they have mostly failed to provide an environment in which spiritual growth is a lifestyle” (2001, pp. 54-55). While people have a longing for a deeper spiritual experience and a desire to meet God in Scripture, many lack clear instruction and the faith nurture needed to grow in their relationship with God.

### **Justification for the Project**

Beagles notes, “The worldly culture around us certainly tries to draw us away from God, and if we don’t intentionally plan to build up our lives in Christ, we shouldn’t be so surprised that so many Adventist don’t know much about ‘abiding in Christ’” (interview by Knott, 2011, p. 19). If the Seventh-day Adventist Church wants its members to be “people of the book” and desire for members to abide in Christ, there is a need for more teaching, materials, and discipleship experiences available for people to learn how to read and reflect on Scripture for relationship and transformation. Since many Christians are not spending consistent time in Scripture, this is an opportunity for revival and new life. Barna research indicates, “churches have a tremendous opportunity to facilitate deeper commitment among believers” (2001, p. 46).

This project seeks to develop a more intentional approach to disciple people in their relationship with God and their experience in Scripture through the discipleship practices of reception, reflection, and reciprocation. Being receptive to God is the first step; through prayer, and intentional time set aside to be with God, one prepares to be available to God and the Spirit. Second, the practice of reflection involves meeting God in Scripture as one listens

for how God is speaking Scripture into one's life. And third, reciprocation involves sharing God's Word in supportive spiritual community. It is in experiencing the presence of God through Scripture and in the midst of community that disciples grow more deeply in their relationship with God and with one another.

This project highlights the need for Scripture reflection curriculum as well as the development process and implementation of Scripture reflection groups in the Walla Walla University Church. Impacts of the implementation will be discussed, along with areas that would benefit from further study.

### **Expectations for the Project**

A significant benefit of this project is that it has contributed powerfully to my on-going spiritual development and confirmed the transformational benefits of clinging tenaciously to the Word of God. This process has confirmed and renewed my passion for and dependence on God's Word and has resulted in the development of a model of discipleship, teaching people how to immerse themselves in Scripture for relationship with God. This project involves the development of a Scripture reflection curriculum and the formation of two pilot groups that then led to additional small groups. It is expected that as participants spend time in the Word of God, and experience discipleship community, they will grow in love for God and love for one another (Matt 22:37-39; NIV used throughout paper unless noted). These outcomes will be discussed further in Chapter 5.

It is hoped that this project can serve as a resource in the Seventh-day Adventist Church, and that it can be applied more broadly in different contexts. It is the intention of this project to use this research to improve the curriculum and implementation methods and to later publish this research for use in local churches.

### **Delimitations**

This project's intent was to develop meaningful curriculum for teaching people in the Walla Walla University church community ways to reflect on Scripture for relationship with God and personal faith formation. So while it is desired that this curriculum would be helpful to other churches and individuals, this project was limited to the Walla Walla University church community. The members in this study were self-selected, and as such, participation was limited to those who demonstrated interest in reflecting on Scripture and initiated involvement in this discipleship opportunity.

Because this project focuses on the specific discipleship practice of reading Scripture it is not an exhaustive discipleship method. While the Scripture reflection groups included a significant time for prayer and sharing with one another, the groups did not include instruction on the breadth of various discipleship practices such as prayer, fasting, worship, evangelism, and service. It is expected that time in God's Word will include and lead to other discipleship practices; however, they were not the focus of this study, because, by its design, this project was limited in nature.

Focus groups were utilized to evaluate the impact of the groups and material in the lives of the participants; however, since focus groups rely on self-reporting, they are subjective in nature and depend on the member's own evaluation of their experience. This limits the project evaluation to the impact that members were able to recognize in their lives and that they were willing to share in the context of a focus group.

### **Limitations**

As mentioned above, participants of the study were self-selected; age and gender of participants were not determined by the researcher. This resulted in the first of two pilot small groups consisting of all women, while the second small group was a mix of men and

women. The self-selection recruiting process did not result in a large amount of age diversity. Although there was participation from those in their 20-40s, the majority of members were in their 50-70s. Therefore, evaluating this project's effectiveness on varying age groups is limited. It is also recognized that in the self-selection process of recruiting members, participants may represent those who are more spiritually motivated and potentially already engaged in practices to grow closer to God, and those that are more self-motivated to pursue spiritual growth.

Relationship with God and personal transformation is an on-going process. While this project sought to measure the impact of both the Bible reflection curriculum and the context of experiential learning in a small group, the long-term results are difficult to measure given the on-going nature of the work of God's Spirit. Therefore, assessment of the lasting impacts of this project is limited.

### **Definition of Terms**

This project includes the use of some terms that may be helpful to define clearly in the context of this study. The following definitions form the foundation for these terms as they will be used throughout this paper and will be further discussed along with the concepts they reflect.

The word *community* or more specifically the term *spiritual community*, refers to a group of people, joined together with a common purpose, to seek God together and encourage one another. Larry Crabb describes spiritual community as a safe place to talk with one another in ways in which the "power of connection" can "be used of God to restore our souls" (1999, pp. 11, 19-20).

The word *disciple* in the original biblical context refers to someone who is a follower of Jesus, and someone who is learning and growing to be more like Him (Barna, 2001, p. 17).

*Discipleship* is the ongoing life and development of a disciple. It is the growth process that is described in Ephesians 4:13 with the goal of becoming “mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.”

The term *experiential learning* differs from learning that is rote, passive or merely informational in nature; but rather it is the process of learning through personal experience (Kemp, 2010, p. 118; Hedin, 2010, p. 108).

The terms *formation* and *transformation* are what Scripture speaks of when it says, “Christ is formed in you” (Gal 4:19). *Formation* and *transformation* describe the process of being molded and changed to be like Christ (White, 1911, p. 475).

*Meditation* or *reflection*, in reference to Scripture, involves spending time reading, repeating, and pondering the Word of God in order to “fill the mind with Scripture or thoughts of God’s character or mighty deeds. In so doing, we make Him the center of our attention . . . we meditate on God in order that we might know Him, love Him, and serve Him” (Tucker, 2007, p. 80). Ellen White describes Christian meditation saying, “The truth of God is to be the subject for his contemplation and meditation. He is to regard the Bible as the voice of God speaking directly to him. Thus he will find the wisdom which is divine” (White, 1911, p. 474).

### **A Proposed Bible Reflection Curriculum and Process Methodology**

This project was developed using the framework presented by Dr. Allan Walshe in class (Personal communication, 2001, 2013) of an experiential small group that teaches devotional habits. It is structured on the following three foundations: (a) scriptural foundation with a theological emphasis on the God of relationship, what Scripture says about relationship with God, and how this was demonstrated through the life of Jesus; (b) a survey

of current literature regarding discipleship, Scripture reading practices, and small groups; (c) the researcher's personal experience in class, with Scripture and in discipleship community.

For this project, an eight-week Scripture reflection curriculum was developed and two pilot small groups were conducted. Participants were self-selected, and were those who signed up for the groups in response to advertising through bulletin announcements, Facebook and posters around the church. It was the hope that those who responded would accurately represent the Walla Walla University church community.

Qualitative research methods were used to determine the impact of the small groups and the Scripture reflection curriculum in the lives of the participants. Small group participants voluntarily participated in the focus groups. Questions were asked about the effectiveness and influence of the Scripture reflection curriculum, member's weekly personal time in Scripture, and the impact of their community learning experience.

### Curriculum Outline

An eight-week curriculum was developed by the pastor-facilitator and conducted with two groups of volunteer participants from the Walla Walla University Church. Anyone who was interested in participating in the Scripture reflection small group was welcome to join. It was expected that the participants would commit to the entire eight-week experience.

The two pilot groups were hosted in the home of the pastor-facilitator with the goal of providing a comfortable environment and sense of close community. The eight-week curriculum included seven Scripture reflection methods. The weekly meetings were one and a half hours in length and included a discussion of members' experiences in Scripture the previous week, a description of a new Scripture reflection practice, time to experience and discuss the new reflection practice for that week, and suggestions of ways to apply the new



Scripture reflection practice throughout the up-coming week. The weekly curriculum and group format will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 4.

At the end of both eight-week small groups a focus group was conducted to evaluate the effectiveness of the groups and the curriculum material. The participants were asked a series of questions about their experience in the small group and with the Scripture reflection material and the resulting impact on their lives. The reliability of the research and outcomes is based on the honesty and self-perceptions of the participants. These results will be discussed further in Chapter 5.

### Initial Results

A total of 19 members consistently participated in the two pilot groups, nine members in the first group and 10 members in the second group. The concluding focus groups revealed that the members experienced many positive benefits (see Appendix D for transcript). Participants expressed appreciation for the Scripture reflection emphasis and small group community context. Many discovered new energy and new ways for reading. Some expressed that they learned to appreciate slowing down through Scripture, sitting with one verse or a short passage of Scripture and discovering its depth. All the members expressed that learning in community enriched their experience. Numerous members spoke of their desire to share their experience and the Scripture reflection practices with others. One member went on to lead two other small groups using the curriculum material developed for this project. The results of these pilot groups and the subsequent groups will be explored more in Chapter 5.

## **Summary**

This project set out to develop a Scripture reflection curriculum that would be shared with church members through experiential discipleship community. The measure of success was whether participants discovered new depth or new life from their time in Scripture and whether they grew in their relationship with God and with one another. This is determined by the evaluation of participants themselves.

This project is not a comprehensive discipleship method but serves to address the need for intentional methods of teaching people how to experience relationship with God through the transformative power of God's presence through Scripture. While the long-term impact of this project in the lives of the participants cannot be measured within the scope of this paper, it is evident that the Scripture reflection groups and materials proved to be an effective method to disciple members in spending time in Scripture for relationship with God and for faith formation. Additionally, this project confirms the importance of discipleship community and the benefits of sharing God's Word with one another in the context of this community.

This paper is summarized as follows: Chapter 1 outlines the need for intentional methods to disciple people in how to read and reflect on Scripture to experience a deepening relationship with God, the purposes and expectations of this project, and reviews the intervention implemented in the local church. Chapter 2 provides the theological foundation for the project, and is grounded in a God of relationship; it is this understanding of a God who desires relationship that leads to a relational and experiential approach to Scripture and community. Chapter 3 reviews pertinent literature relating to discipleship and the practice of reflecting on Scripture. Chapter 4 describes development of the Scripture reflection curriculum and its implementation in the context of small groups. Chapter 5 assesses the

outcomes and impact of the groups and material in the lives of the participants and addresses areas for further study.

The results of this study will inform ongoing implementation of the Scripture reflection curriculum. Along with further research, this project will be used to develop additional materials and will suggest further uses of this curriculum that can extend more broadly to other local church contexts.

## CHAPTER 2

### COMMUNION, COMMUNICATION, AND COMMUNITY: A THEOLOGICAL UNDERSTANDING OF GOD'S PURSUIT OF RELATIONSHIP

#### **Introduction**

In my undergraduate training to become a pastor, I went to South Africa to preach a series of evangelistic meetings. When I arrived, young adults of the church gathered so I could hear their stories and get to know what they hoped for in attending the meetings. These young adults had been raised in the church, and many had been through at least two or three baptismal studies and attended other evangelistic meetings, yet they had not made decisions for baptism. When asked why, the young adults poured out their hearts, expressing that no one had shown what the baptismal lessons and doctrines actually had to do with everyday life and relationship with God. They hungered to know how to apply the teachings to their lives. They asked questions about how to know who God really is and how to have an on-going relationship with Him, how to hear His voice, and how to read and apply Scripture. Their questions hang heavy on my heart. How could these young people have been in church all their lives and sat through more than one set of baptismal lessons and evangelistic meetings, yet never be taught the incredible difference God makes in a life, how to encounter God, or have a meaningful relationship with Him?

Years later, as a pastor, similar conversations and similar questions surfaced in congregations across the United States: How do I have a relationship with God? How do I read the Bible in a meaningful way? How do I hear God's voice and leading in my life? All those who have asked these questions have been Seventh-day Adventist Christians most of their lives, attended our academies and colleges, and sat in our churches week after week. Those that ask these questions have admitted that they know church beliefs and doctrines yet are missing something, longing for and seeking something more.

Could it be that these commonly asked questions and conversations demonstrate that the Seventh-day Adventist Church has taught people information about God while failing to teach relationship with Him? Even as Bible studies have led members to ascribe to certain beliefs, they remain uncertain how to open the pages of Scripture to meet God personally. Could it be that in the church's traditional process of making disciples, people are baptized into 28 fundamental doctrines and not into a fundamentally life-changing relationship with God? Could it be that people are being instructed on what to believe about God, but not how to be with God in a meaningful state of connectedness?

The need of a greater emphasis on relationship with God has guided and directed my ministry and led to the creation of Scripture reflection groups in the Walla Walla University Church. These groups were formed and the curriculum developed as a result of the conviction that it is in knowing and experiencing the God of relationship that questions are answered, longings satisfied, and lives transformed. Therefore, small group Scripture reflection curriculum was developed to disciple people in reading and reflecting on Scripture as a way to seek, experience, and grow in relationship with God.

It is the theological understanding of a relational God and His Word that transforms His people today that provided the biblical foundation for the Scripture reflection groups in the Walla Walla University Church. The purpose of this chapter is to examine the biblical and theological foundations of a relational God and explore how God develops relationship with people through three main ways: (a) communion (dwelling with us), (b) communication (speaking with us), and (c) community (calling us together). Additionally, this chapter will highlight foundational discipleship principals in response to God's pursuit in communion, communication, and community. It is the hope of this project that as people spend time being with God, listening to God in His Word, and experiencing Him through community with others, they will experience God personally, grow closer to Him, apply His Word to their lives, and that relationship with God will transform their hearts, minds, and lives.

In answering the question, How do I have a relationship with God? it is helpful to first look at who God is and how He pursues relationship with His people. Tozer writes, "What comes to our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us" (1961, p. 1). Speaking to this statement, Tucker adds, "I believe that even our longings for God are shaped by our thoughts about Him. . . It is only as we learn to think rightly about God that the awareness of our hunger for Him grows" (2007, p. 19). Therefore, in the pursuit of thinking rightly about God, we will now turn our attention to the God of relationship, and as we do, may our desire to respond to Him grow.

### **A God of Transformation**

The Scriptures reveal a passionate God who pursues transformative relationship with His people. It is through the relational connections of communion, communication,

and community that God works this transformation. Relationship with God transforms the hearts, minds, lives and relationships of His disciples. It is this transformation that the psalmist asks for and sings, “Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me” (Ps 51:10).

When God created man and woman, he did not speak them into existence as he had done with the previous works of creation. Instead he formed humankind from the dust of the earth. God made humankind as a transformative creation, changing dust to life. The same God that breathed life into dust can also bring new life, new breath, new spirit into the dust of His people’s lives today. This creation process is a reminder of the transformative God that can re-create hearts and minds on a daily basis if submitted into His formative hands.

God promises to accomplish this transformation in the lives of His people, reminding them it is a work that only He can do, “Moreover, I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; and I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh” (Ezek 36:26). As an illustration of God’s transformative power, God brings the prophet Ezekiel to a valley of dry bones and asks him, “Son of man, can these bones live?” (37:3). The answer to God’s questions is only in God himself, for it was not Ezekiel that could bring life to dead bones, but the Word of the Lord. For God said,

Prophesy to these bones and say to them, “Dry bones, hear the word of the Lord! This is what the Sovereign Lord says to these bones: I will make breath enter you, and you will come to life. I will attach tendons to you and make flesh come upon you and cover you with skin; I will put breath in you, and you will come to life. Then you will know that I am the Lord.” (Ezek 37:4-6)

As the dry bones took on skin, inhaled the breath of God and came to life, God again confirmed, “I will put my Spirit in you and you will live” (Ezek 37:14). Just as it was with the dry, dead bones, it is only through the power of God’s Word that disciples today are transformed and given new life. It is only through the Spirit of God that disciples are given new hearts, minds, and spirits. To hear and live in connection with the Word of God is to enter into a transformative interaction with God.

The New Testament speaks often of God’s transformation work (Rom 12:2; 2 Cor 3:18; Gal 4:19). New Testament authors testify that it is relationship with Jesus that transforms one’s life. “And we all, who with unveiled faces contemplate the Lord’s (Jesus’) glory, are being transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit” (2 Cor 3:18). This transformation process is passive, meaning, it is produced in the life of a disciple by Jesus and His Spirit; it is a work only He can do. The transformation process is also progressive as it says we are “being transformed.” This is not a work of an instant but an on-going transformational process through relationship with Jesus. A disciple’s participation in the transformation process is simply to “contemplate the Lord’s glory” (v. 18). With “unveiled faces,” disciples are to look unto Jesus, spending time in His presence, reflecting on His goodness. As disciples do this, they are transformed by God’s Spirit to be a reflection of His glory.

### **A God of Relationship**

Scripture portrays a personal God, a God who is active and involved in the lives of people. Scripture reveals a God who not only created, but who desires an ongoing presence in the lives of His creation as He forms, transforms, loves, forgives, heals,



saves, redeems, leads, and guides (Gen 1:1; Isa 41:10; Ezek 36:26; 2 Cor 3:18; 1 John 1:9; Exod 15:26; Eph 2:8; Zeph 3:17; Ps 103:4; Isa 58:11). These passages present God as actively forming, seeking, and wooing creation into relationship. As we seek to understand this God of relationship, we will examine how God portrays the relationship He desires with His people and the way in which God calls people into relationship.

### Relational Titles of God

God, through Scripture, speaks of himself as a God of relationship who desires a deeply personal connection with His people. God speaks to this intimate connection as He affirms, “I am yours and you are mine” (Lev 26:12; Ezek 11:20; Zech 8:8; 2 Cor 6:16). God gives himself to His people as God invites them into relationship with Him. Further demonstrating God’s desire for relationship, Scripture uses relationship analogies to convey the personal connection God desires to have with His people. The following is a sampling of such relational examples.

#### **Mother, Father**

God describes himself as a parent, both a mother and a father. God is portrayed in Scripture as a mother who comforts (Isa 66:13, Matt 23:37, Luke 13:34); a mother who will never forget her child (Isa 49:15); a mother who defends (Hos 13:8); and a mother who protects, carries, and leads her young (Deut 32:11-12, 18). Even more commonly, Scripture refers to God as father, often calling him “God the Father” or “God our Father” (Gal 1:3; Rom 1:7). Scripture represents God as a father to the fatherless (Ps 68:5); a father who blesses (Eph 1:3); a father who redeems (Isa 63:16); a father who comforts (2 Cor 1:3-4); a father who gives good gifts (Jas 1:17); a father who knows what we need

before we ask (Matt 6:8); a father who cares (v. 26); and a father who loves deeply and lavishly (1 John 3:1). His people are described as children of God who can call God by the personal title “daddy/abba” (Rom 8:14-16); children who have been adopted into God’s family and have the rights of sonship (vv. 14-16).

### **Spouse**

God is also described in Scripture as a husband, “For your Maker is your husband—the LORD Almighty is his name—the Holy One of Israel is your Redeemer; he is called the God of all the earth” (Isa 54:5). God describes himself to prophet Hosea as a husband who woos and comforts, ““Therefore I am now going to allure her; I will lead her into the desert and speak tenderly to her. . . In that day,’ declares the Lord. ‘You will call me ‘my husband’ you will no longer call me ‘my master’” (Hos 2:14-16).

Therefore, if God is the husband, His people are His honored bride who are pure (because of what God has done), promised to, and rejoiced over (Rev 19:7-9; 21:9, 2 Cor 11:2, Isa 62:5). Again these texts demonstrate that God longs for more than mere service as a servant to a master; he longs for the intimacy of relationship, like a husband to a wife.

### **Brother and Friend**

Jesus is also described in relational terms. Speaking of those in Jesus Christ, Hebrews 2:11 affirms, “So Jesus is not ashamed to call them brothers and sisters.” Jesus himself also personally describes the friendship He desires with his people: “I no longer call you slaves, because the slave does not understand what his master is doing. But I have called you friends, because I have revealed to you everything I heard from my

Father” (John 15:15). Yet again, God’s people are not just servants, mindlessly serving a master, but rather they are brothers and sisters and friends.

It is in this language of relationship and friendship that God has revealed himself, so He can be known personally. In these relationship analogies, God seems to be trying to change perspectives on who He is and what He desires. While some approach discipleship as a set of beliefs to adhere to or as dutiful servanthood, God says he longs for more. He longs for a personal, intimate, transformative relationship with His people. God is a God of relationship

### **The Transformative Call of Discipleship**

The call of discipleship reveals the heart of God—calling out to people, inviting them into relationship. Our current understanding of discipleship is founded on the experience of first century discipleship. The original Greek word for disciple is μαθητεύω which means, “learner or follower, apprentice or pupil.” In the first century, disciples were those who followed a certain Rabbi or teacher. The disciples lived closely with their Rabbi, learned everything from them, memorized what they taught, and imitated their character. Then, they would go on to teach others (Hull, 2006, pp. 63-64). Discipleship was all about relationship with the Rabbi, and in turn relationship with others.

Jesus initiated Christian discipleship when he called a group of twelve people to be in relationship with him—to walk, live, and learn with him. As the disciples were in relationship with Jesus, they also were in relationship with one another (Matt 4:19; 9:9; Mark 1:17; 2:14; Luke 5:10-11, 27-28). Interestingly, Jesus’s initial call to His disciples was not a call to adhere to a set of beliefs, instructions or duties; rather, it was a call to

personal, intimate relationship. It was a call to journey life with Jesus. In the New Testament, the term disciple grew to include not just the original twelve disciples, but anyone who entered into relationship with Jesus Christ (Matt 28:18-20; John 8:31; Acts 6:2, 7). It was in relationship, as the disciples spent time communing with Jesus, as they listened to Him communicate His heart, and as they lived in community with Him, that they grew in faith and were transformed to be more like Jesus. This is still the call of discipleship today.

The call of discipleship is a call from the heart of God to the heart of His people; a call to relationship. First Corinthians 1:9 states that God “has called you into fellowship with His son Jesus Christ our Lord.” It is about the significance of this fellowship that White writes when she says, “In order to have spiritual life and energy, we must have an actual relationship with our heavenly Father” (1892, p. 93). One cannot be a disciple or have spiritual life without a personal relationship with God. God has called His people into fellowship, and it is this relationship that gives true life.

Jesus said, “You study the Scriptures diligently because you think that in them you have eternal life. These are the very Scriptures that testify of me, yet you refuse to come to me to have life” (John 5:39-40). A similar problem exists today. Too often, attempts at discipleship emphasize mastery of information about Scripture while overlooking relationship with the source of life in Scripture: Jesus, the Word of God. As the church makes disciples of Jesus and nurtures their faith development, the call to a life-giving, life-changing relationship with Jesus must be the primary call.

The following section will explore how God pursues and engages in relationship with His people through communion, communication, and community. We will also

discuss foundational discipleship practices that enable disciples to respond to the pursuit of God.

### **Relationship Formation Through Communion**

#### **God Dwells With His People in the Old Testament**

The stories and writings of the Old Testament paint a powerful image of Almighty God dwelling with His people. In moments when they might doubt or fear, God encourages His people by reminding them of His presence with them. It is God's presence that gives His people strength and moves them forward in faith. To people like Isaac, Jacob, Moses, Joshua, King David, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Haggai, Zephaniah, God's promised presence echoes, "I am with you" (Gen 26:3, 24; Gen 28:15; Josh 1:9; 1 Chr 28:20; Isa 41:10; Jer 30:11, 42:11, 46:28; Hag 2:4; Zeph 3:17). God's promises of His presence with His people are also a promise of His participation in their lives and circumstances as God declares in these passages, "I will bless you; I will watch over you; I will not leave you; I will strengthen you; I will uphold you; I will rescue you."

Additionally, God gave His people visual reminders of His presence with them. After delivering His people from slavery in Egypt, God led them through the desert to the Promise Land with such signs as the cloud by day and fire by night. Not only did the cloud provide shade from the desert sun and the fire provide light and warmth on the dark cold nights, but these signs served as reminders of God's abiding presence and leading. Furthermore, God gave Israel visual symbols of His presence through the Sanctuary. God commanded Moses and Israel, "Then have them make a sanctuary for me, and I will dwell among them" (Exod 25:8). The Sanctuary was to be in the center of the Israelite camp, a constant reminder of a God who communes with His people, dwelling in their

midst (White, 1898, p. 23). It was God's dwelling presence that was to be at the very center of their lives and community.

### God Dwells With His People in the New Testament

In the New Testament, Jesus is the embodiment of God's presence with His people. It was foretold about Jesus that He would be called Immanuel which literally means "God *with* us" (Isa 7:14; Matt 1:23; White, 1898, pp. 19, 23, 24). In the Gospels, Jesus is the living Tabernacle, the dwelling of God camped in the midst of His people (p. 23). In Jesus, the symbols and practices of the Sanctuary are fulfilled: He is the gate and the way, the sacrifice on the altar, the cleansing of sin, the bread of life, the intercessor, and the atonement (Isa 53:10; John 1:29, 36, 6:35, 10:9, 14:6; Acts 22:16; Heb 8:2, 9:12, 22, 24, 10:1-18). Jesus was and is God with us and God for us. It was Jesus' presence communing, dwelling, living, and being with the people that taught, led, healed, transformed, and redeemed them. It is through the life and death of Jesus, the incarnate "God with us," that God made provision for us to be with Him and dwell with Him throughout all eternity.

The last promise of Jesus was a promise of His continued presence, "Surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age" (Matt 28:20). Before Jesus physically left the earth, He spoke of another way that God would dwell with His people. Jesus would not leave them without His presence but the Holy Spirit, the great Comforter, would intimately dwell within them. The Holy Spirit's presence living in the hearts of God's people would be an even closer communion than when Jesus physically walked beside them. While He once was the living Christ in their midst, now He would be the "indwelling Christ" in their very hearts (1 Cor 3:16; John 14:17, 16:7; Acts 4:13; White,

1958, p. 62). With the coming of the Holy Spirit the new tabernacle would not be the constructed temple, or even in the person of Jesus Christ, but the hearts and lives of God's people. Paul speaks of this, "Don't you know that you yourselves are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in your midst?" (1 Cor 3:16; 6:19). Here Paul's Word echoed God's Old Testament promise to write His promises on the hearts of His people (Jer 31:33). God's longing has always been this intimate indwelling presence with His people.

The resounding message of Scripture is that God is powerfully and actively with His people. It is God's presence with His people that forms and transforms, that gives one courage to go forward or stay still, to face enemies, to take leadership, to follow in whatever way God is calling. It is God's presence that gives hope, assurance and strength to repent, obey, and follow wherever He may lead. God is a God of relationship and His pursuit of that relationship is lived out through God's abiding presence with His people. One day, the ultimate fulfillment of God's promises will be realized and God, in fullness, will dwell with His people throughout eternity. The concluding promise confirms, "Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be His people, and God himself will be with them and be their God" (Rev 21:2-3).

#### Foundational Discipleship Practice: Communing With God

Since God's desire is to be with His people, a fundamental call of discipleship is to be with God, to spend time communing with Him. As mentioned previously, this was the call of New Testament discipleship. Jesus called disciples to be with him, to live and commune with Him. As they followed Jesus, He demonstrated to His disciples what communion with God looks like. Jesus took intentional time to be with God the Father,

to grow in relationship with Him. Before starting His ministry, Jesus took time away to fast and pray (Matt 4:1-11; Luke 4:1-13). During His ministry, Jesus took time to commune with God apart from life's distraction and demands. Jesus can be seen communing with God both early in the morning, before starting His day, after a long day and during particularly stressful times (Mark 1:35; Matt 14:22, Luke 6:12, 4:42, 5:16, 6:12; Mark 6:45-46). Before His crucifixion, Jesus strengthened Himself for the difficulty ahead by spending time communing with God (Matt 26:36-56; Mark 14:32-41; Luke 22:39-46; White, 1911, p. 56; 1905, p. 58).

Jesus lived out the discipleship principal of communion with God and also specifically instructed His disciples how this holy communion was to be lived. In John 15:1-8, Jesus compared the connection and communion disciples were to have with Him to a vine and its branches. In this teaching, Jesus used the word "remain" seven times, four of which called His disciples to remain in communion with Himself, the vine. As a branch lives through connection with the vine, disciples were to live through connection and communion with their vine, Jesus. Without this connection, His disciples could do nothing. It was in this vine-branch communion with Jesus that the disciple's desires were met, spiritual fruit was grown, and they were recognized as His disciples (White, 1958, p. 110).

Those who seek to follow Christ today must also take time apart from duties and distractions to commune with God, making themselves available for relationship development so that His life may be lived out through them (White, 1905, p. 136). Like a lover's call to his beloved (Cant 2:16; 7:10), the heart of God calls to His people, "Come unto me. Come spend time with me. Come dwell in my presence. Come connect



yourself to the source of life.” Communion with God is a foundational call and practice of discipleship.

## **Relationship Formation Through Communication**

### **The Word of God**

As God pursues relationship with His people, God finds many ways to communicate (White, 1892, p. 85). A variety of these ways are listed and briefly discussed in Appendix A, however, one of the primary ways in which God communicates is through His written Word. The Bible is known as and often called “The Word of God.” It is the Bible as the Word of God that is the focus of this project and therefore the focus of this chapter. Through the Bible, God speaks, giving us the most complete picture of Himself (White, 1892, pp. 87-88). It is through God’s word in Scripture that God reveals His character, speaks words of guidance, direction, encouragement, and comfort, speaks in answer to His children’s questions or cries for help, and speaks of His ability to form one’s life.

In the first chapters of Scripture God speaks the world into being. God said, “Let there be . . .” and there was. God’s word is shown to be powerful, with the ability to create and bring forth life (Gen 1-2; Ps 33:6, 9). God’s word through Scripture is also demonstrated to be powerful to create and bring forth spiritual life in a disciple. Although the Bible is an ancient book, the Bible speaks of itself as alive and active today (Heb 4:12), and its message powerful and effective in the life of a disciple in many ways. The following is a sampling of some of those ways.

*God’s Word is powerful, as armor for one’s life.* Several times in Scripture, God’s Word is described as a piece of armor. In Hebrews, God’s Word is a sword that

“penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart” (4:12). In this passage, God’s Word is a sword that cuts through a person’s exterior and reveals the depths of one’s heart, spirit, and life; opening a person to the core so they are vulnerable to the work of God. In Ephesians, God Word is the “sword of the Spirit” that helps one stand “against the spiritual forces of evil” (Eph 6:10-17). In Proverbs, the Word of God is a shield that gives one refuge (30:5). In these passages, God’s Word both unveils one’s self to the light of God’s penetrating gaze and also protects one from the darkness of the enemy’s attacks. God’s Word is powerful as both exposure and defense.

*God’s Word is powerful in its ability to guide and direct one’s life.* In the Old Testament, the Psalms speak of God’s Word as a powerful light (119:105). It is the light of God’s Word that illuminates one’s path and helps one stay away from the pitfalls of sin (vv. 9-11). In a similar way, in the New Testament, 2 Tim also speaks to the ways that God’s word powerfully guides one’s life. Timothy confirms that Scripture is the Word of God, calling it “God-breathed.” It is these God-breathed words that have the power to make one “wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus” and “is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work” (2 Tim 3:15-17). In these passages, God’s Word is a light, guide, teacher, trainer, and equipper that forms and directs one’s life for the purposes of God.

*God’s Word is powerful to satisfy one’s longings, to give, sustain, and grow one’s life.* In the Bible, the consumption of the Word of God is compared to the consumption of food and drink. And one’s desire for God is described as thirst or hunger (Ps 42:2;

63:1; Isa 55:1; Matt 5:6; John 4:13-14; 6:33-35; 7:37; Rev 21:6; 22:17). It is for relationship with God that the psalmist writes, “As a deer longs for flowing streams, so my soul longs for you, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When shall I come and behold the face of God? (Ps 42:1-2). It is the presence of God through His Word that satisfies one’s greatest hunger and thirst. God’s Word is spiritual food, giving spiritual flavor to one’s life, cultivating health, and growing a person to be spiritually mature (Matt 4:4; Deut 8:3; Heb 5:12; 1 Pet 2:2; 1 Cor 3:2). Just as food and drink has the power to sustain and build up the human body, so the life-giving Word of God has the power to sustain and build up one’s spiritual life (White, 1892, pp. 87-88). As disciples taste the goodness of God through His Word, a powerful transformation occurs and they become the flavor of God’s goodness to the world (Ps 34:8; Matt 5:13).

*God’s Word is a transformational blessing in in one’s life.* The Psalms sing often of the great blessings for those who read God’s Word and open themselves to be formed by its message and power. The Psalms describe the person who “meditates on the law day and night” as a tree planted by springs of water.” This means the disciple is rooted, grown and nourished through the constant feeding of God’s Word (Ps 1:1-3). For those who immerse themselves in God’s Word, it has the power to nourish and grow the soul, enlighten the mind, bring joy to the heart, and in doing so, God’s Word becomes of utmost value and supreme delight (Ps 19:7-11).

### Jesus and the Word

Jesus demonstrated a life saturated in listening to and living the Word of God. As Jesus prepared to start His ministry and spent time fasting, praying, and communing with God in the desert, it was the Word of God that Jesus quoted and used to withstand the

temptations of the devil (Matt 4:1-11). As Jesus taught His disciples and those gathered around Him, He often taught by quoting from Scripture, explaining it, and expounding on its meaning (Matt 5, 9, 13:4-5; Mark 7:6-7; Luke 4:17-19, 7:27; John 6:45, 8:17).

Additionally, as Jesus took time away to commune with God both early in the morning and after a long or difficult day, Jesus spent this time of communion in communication with God the Father through prayer and in the reading of Scripture (Mark 13:5; Luke 6:12). Of this Ellen White writes of Jesus, saying He delighted in spending hours in the Word of God and that “the early morning often found Him in some secluded place, meditating, searching the Scriptures, or in prayer” (White, 1905, p. 52).

#### Foundational Discipleship Practice: Listening to God

Throughout Scripture God is found communicating with His people and it is this communication that nurtures relationship and changes lives, answers questions and satisfies desires, and brings the richest blessings and greatest rewards. Jesus affirmed the importance of Scripture in discipleship saying, “If you abide in My word, you are My disciples indeed” (John 8:31, ESV). Disciples are to abide in the Word and the Word is to abide in them. Of this the Apostle implores, “Let the Word of Christ dwell in you richly” (Col 3:16, ESV). A foundational practice of discipleship is an abiding, dwelling relationship with God’s Word.

The Bible often speaks of the abiding and dwelling relationship with God’s Word as meditating. God instructs Joshua, “Do not let this Book of the Law depart from your mouth; meditate on it day and night” (Josh 1:8). The Psalms also frequently speak of meditating on God’s Word, His goodness, and His mighty deeds, emphasizing meditation both day and night (Ps 1:2; 48:9; 77:12; 119:23, 27, 48; 143:5; 145:5). The consumption

of God's Word should consume the life of a disciple. The act of savoring and meditating on God's Word implies taking time enjoy it, delight in it, treasure it, and absorb it into one's heart and mind. Ellen White writes of the importance of savoring and meditating on Scripture, saying, "But there is but little benefit derived from a hasty reading of the Scriptures. One may read the whole Bible through and yet fail to see its beauty or comprehend its deep and hidden meaning." White clarifies, "One passage studied until its significance is clear to the mind and its relation to the plan of salvation is evident, is of more value than the perusal of many chapters with no definite purpose in view and no positive instruction gained" (White, 1892, pp. 90-91).

Meditating on Scripture involves listening to God's through His Word; however, one may ask: "How do I listen to God?" The story of Elijah offers some answers as God speaks to the discouraged and fearful Elijah. As Elijah waited on a mountain for God to come and speak with him, Elijah looks and listens for God in wind, in an earthquake, and a fire. But God was not in any of those displays. Rather the voice of God to Elijah came in the form of a "gentle whisper" (1 Kgs 19). It was not in the noise of the wind, the movement of the earthquake, or the sensation of the fire in which God spoke; it was in the stillness and the quietness that God whispered to the listening ear.

Listening to God involves stillness and silence. King David writes of the practice of listening to God as a weaning process, saying, "I have stilled and quieted my soul" (Ps 131:2). White also writes of the "bustle of activity" that keeps one from hearing God, encouraging, "When every other voice is hushed, when every earthly interest is turned aside, the silence of the soul makes more distinct the voice of God. Here rest is found in him. (1897, p. 163). Hearing God through Scripture involves the deliberate practice of

silencing the noise that clamors for one's attention, and ceasing from the demanding activities of life long enough to hear the gentle whisper of God. It is in this silence and stillness that the words of God come to one's heart and mind; bringing peace, joy, and life (p. 163).

### **Relationship Formation Through Community**

#### **Existence, Creation, and Formation of Community**

One of the ways that God both communes and communicates with His people is through the context of spiritual community. While God works to form individual relationships with His people through quiet moments of intimate communion, He also works transformation through community and engagement. The pages of Scripture testify that God exists in community, He created community, and He works through His people in community.

God creates and works through the context of community because He exists in the context of community. God is one and this oneness exists in the unified community of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (Deut 6:4; Matt 28:19; Eph 4:4-6; 1 Pet 1:2). Speaking of Himself, God says of His creation of humankind, "Let us make man in our image, in our likeness" (Gen 1:26). God says "Let us," and it is in the image of this Holy "Us" that God created humanity. Because God exists both in oneness and community, when God creates, He creates both community and oneness. The significance of community finds its identity in the very existence of God (Bilezikian, 1997. p. 16; General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, 2016).

Since God exists in community and created humanity in community, it is not surprising that God would choose to pursue relationship with His people as they

commune together. Through the assembly of His people, God calls, leads, affirms, encourages, teaches, and forms His people in His image and for His purposes. The stories of Scripture demonstrate the formational role of community as it: affirms God's voice and calling (1 Sam 3:1-21; Acts 6:3; 2 Tim 1:6-9); invites the Holy Spirit's presence (Acts 2:1-12; 9:17); shares both burdens and blessings (Exod 18:14-22; Acts 4:32-36); and supports and prays for one another (Esth 4:16; Dan 2:17-19). God's powerful presence working in and through spiritual community brings transformational blessings.

To better understand God's pursuit of relationship with His people through the context community, let us now survey three main communities in Scripture: Israel, Jesus' disciples, and the New Testament Church.

### Israel in Community

In the Old Testament, it was the promised descendants of Abraham, the Israelite community, whom God called to be His special people. It was to the Israelite community as a whole that God spoke words of promise, rebuke, guidance, forgiveness, and restoration. It was to the Israelite community that God gave His Commandments and Covenants (Exod 20; Gen 12:1-3; Exod 19:5-6; 2 Sam 7:12-17; 31:31-34).

As God called Israel to be His people, God called them to be "a kingdom of priests and a holy nation" (Exod 19:5-6). However, God's call to the community of Israel was to bless an even broader community. God's purpose in calling Israel was for them to be a testimony to God's goodness so that through them "all the families of the earth" would be blessed (Gen 12:3). Israel, God's chosen holy community of priests, were to minister to the community of the world. This demonstrates that God works to

bless people both in and through community. The purpose of community is to bless those both inside and outside the community.

### Jesus in Community

In the Gospels, we see Jesus surrounded by community. Jesus ministered to large communities of people gathered around him, preaching, teaching, and healing them.

Jesus also intentionally surrounded Himself with a smaller community of twelve dedicated disciples. It was with these twelve that Jesus lived intimately and whom He disciplined personally. Fewer still, the Gospels speak of three disciples, Peter, James, and John, who seemed to be the closest to Jesus; disciples whom Jesus called to be with Him in significant moments of His ministry (Matt 17:1; Mark 14:33; Luke 8:51). Throughout Jesus' ministry, He demonstrated the importance of community as He ministered to large crowds, the small groups, and the few. This can be an example to disciples today for the need for multiple types and sizes of spiritual community. There is not just one type or size of community; there is significance in large gatherings of God's people, smaller more intimate communities, and even a few close friends.

Additionally, it was in the hands of community that Jesus left His ministry and the message of the gospel. After His resurrection, He appeared to Mary, sending her to "go to my brothers" (John 20:17). This 'go' message seems to be the primary call of Jesus after His resurrection and before His ascension. Jesus sends His disciples to His brothers, instructing them to take the message of gospel to the whole world (Matt 28:18-20). Jesus would no longer physically walk and minister on this earth, but His disciples would. The disciples, through the promised power of the Holy Spirit, would be the voice, hands, and feet of the gospel of Jesus and work of God.



## New Testament Disciples in Community

The disciples of Jesus, as Israel before them, would now be God's community of priests with the purpose of blessing the world around them (1 Pet 2:5-9; Heb 8:10-12, 15). It was as God's people were gathered together that the Holy Spirit was poured out and the church grew (Acts 2:1-41). It was when the church lived together, sharing all they had with one another, devoting themselves to Christ and one another, that "the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved" (Acts 2:47). It was as the disciples met together that miracles were performed, more people joined them and crowds gathered around them, bringing their sick to be healed (Acts 5:12-16). God's people gathered together in spiritual community were a powerful witness to God's goodness and blessing to those around them, resulting in the growth of the church.

God dwells, speaks, and pursues relationship with His people in the context of community. God Almighty, maker of Heaven and Earth, bends low to commune, and takes time to communicate with His people. Furthermore, God chooses to dwell and speak to imperfect human beings and work through His people in community to bless one another and others. God not only took on the human flesh of Jesus Christ, but the flawed human flesh of God's disciples becomes home to the Holy Spirit, becoming His hands and His feet ministering to one another.

### Foundational Discipleship Practice: Engaging in Community

As God calls people into relationship with Himself, He calls them into relationship with others. Jesus says His disciples are to love God and love one another (Mark 12:30-31). Love for God and love for others are intimately connected. A loving relationship with God involves loving and being in relationship with others. In

describing this, Ellen White gives the analogy of a circle “from the edge of which are many lines all running to the center. The nearer these lines approach the center, the nearer they are to one another.” So it is with disciples today: “The closer we come to Christ, the nearer we shall be to one another” (White, 1952, p. 179). Therefore, in growing closer to God, a foundational discipleship practice is to engage in community with one another.

Disciples today are called to be a community of priests, ministering to and blessing one another and the world around them (1 Pet 2:5-9; White, 1946, p. 115). The New Testament includes many “one another” passages, teaching how and why disciples should engage in community and bless others. Disciples are to: be devoted to one another (Rom 12:10); honor one another (v. 10); live in harmony with one another (12:16; 1 Pet 3:8); accept one another (Rom 15:7); serve one another (Gal 5:13); be kind and compassionate to one another (Eph 4:32); teach and admonish one another (Col 3:16); encourage one another (1 Thess 5:11; Heb 3:13); spur one another on toward love and good deeds (Heb 10:24-25); offer hospitality to one another (1 Pet 4:9). As disciples love others in these ways they demonstrate their love for God (1 Pet 1:22; 1 John 3:11; 3:23; 4:7; 4:11-12).

Despite disciples’ call to one another, one may avoid meaningful community because it involves the sacrifice of time and the risks of vulnerability. In a world that applauds busyness and independence, meaningful spiritual community can be replaced by excessive activity, isolation, and individualism. However, without connection with one another, a disciple’s connection with God may lose its vitality. Of this White writes, “The truths of His Word lose their vividness and importance in our minds. Our hearts cease to be enlightened and aroused by their sanctifying influence, and we decline in

spirituality.” However, if disciples “associate together, speaking to each other of the love of God and of the precious truths of redemption, their own hearts would be refreshed and they would refresh one another” (1892, pp. 101-102). Therefore, for the health of one’s relationship with God, it is a spiritual imperative for disciples to engage in relationship with community, even with its risks and sacrifices. Maybe in this way, disciples answer the call to be “living sacrifices” both for God and one another (Rom 12:1).

God calls His disciples to Himself and to one another. It is through God’s people communing with one another that God works transformation both in individual lives and in the community itself. A natural result of drawing closer to God is that His disciples draw closer to one another. As disciples grow in love for God, they grow in love for one another. The life of a disciple is not complete without living with and for God’s people.

### **Jesus as Communion, Communication, and Community**

As mentioned previously, Jesus is the physical representation of God dwelling with His people; He is the communication of God, demonstrating what God is like. Jesus is also the center of discipleship community, the One who calls people to Himself and to one another. In Jesus, one can know what God is like, learn of His character, hear His voice, learn to follow after Him, and live in relationship with Him and one another. Real knowledge of God, true spiritual life, and meaningful reading of Scripture is all about Jesus. Bessey (2015) writes, “If we want to know what God is like, we can look to Jesus. And if we want to read the Bible well, we need to start with Jesus and remain in Jesus, and we need to let Jesus explain it” (p. 65).

Jesus is the communion, communication, and community of God. Christian disciples are those who follow after Jesus, those who spend time abiding with Him,

listening to Him, and sharing Him with others. Jesus is the lens in which disciples are to see God, experience him, and relate to one another (Bessey, 2015, pp. 62-65). Reading the Bible is all about reading it through the lens of Jesus. Relationship with God is all about relationship with Jesus. Living in spiritual community is all about sharing Jesus together. Discipleship is all about Jesus.

It is relationship with Jesus that brings transformation. As the Revival and Reformation Committee for the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists affirms,

When we seek Jesus, He fills us with His presence and power through the gift of the Holy Spirit. We long to know Him better. The Holy Spirit reawakens the dormant spiritual faculties of the soul. There is nothing we desire more than to have a deep and life-changing relationship with Jesus. The revived heart experiences a vital connection to Jesus through prayer and the Word. Reformation is the corresponding change that comes in our lives as the result. (Annual Council Action, 2010)

As a disciple spends time communing with Jesus, He dwells in one's heart through the Holy Spirit, forming it after His purposes. As a disciple spends time in communication with Jesus, He speaks into their lives, forming their mind. As a disciple gathers with others in spiritual community, God's presence through one another helps clarify His presence and leading in one's life. Transformation is the life-giving fruit of a relationship with Jesus.

### **Summary and Conclusion**

The preceding biblical and theological study reviewed in this chapter confirms the significance of a God of relationship, a God who breathes into the dust and transforms a valley of dead bones into a spirit-filled life (Gen 2:7; Ezek 37:1-14). God initiates and develops this formative relationship with His people through communion, dwelling closely with His people; communication, speaking through Scripture; and community,

demonstrating His love through others. The call of discipleship is a call to relationship with Jesus; to remain in Him, abide in His Word, and share His goodness with one another.

It is this foundational view of God and discipleship that should shape how the Seventh-day Adventist Church teaches and practices discipleship. An emphasis on relationship with Jesus must be central in evangelism, teaching, preaching, writing, and Bible studies. Some may protest an emphasis on relationship asserting that doctrine is more important and that people must be taught more than “just relationship.” However, as emphasized in John 5:39-40, relationship with Jesus is the life-giving theme of Scripture. Disciples are not those who only proscribe to a set of beliefs, but those who live out the teachings of Scripture in an ongoing relationship with Jesus. While doctrinal truth is important, knowledge of this truth alone does not bring life; only relationship with the God of Truth brings transformation. God does not long for mere servants or rote belief, but for the intimate connection of friendship.

Therefore, the Seventh-day Adventist Church has the opportunity, as people ask questions and seek truth, to offer more than doctrinal facts alone, discipling people in how to have a growing relationship with Jesus through His Word. This would include providing intentional discipleship experiences: teaching members how to commune daily with Jesus, teaching them how to abide in His Word, and providing opportunities for disciples to engage in formational community. This will lead to disciples who “know love that surpasses knowledge” and who are “filled to the measure of all the fullness of God” (Eph 3:19).

This chapter reviewed the biblical foundation for building a relationship with God and foundational discipleship practices were examined. In Chapter 3 current and classic literature will be discussed and will further explore more specifically how to read Scripture to experience and grow in relationship with God. It is to this emphasis we now turn our attention.

## CHAPTER 3

### LITERATURE REVIEW: THE DISCIPLESHIP PRACTICE OF READING SCRIPTURE FOR RELATIONSHIP

#### **Introduction**

The Bible and writings of Ellen White highlight the importance of daily time in the Word of God as a vital way disciples grow their relationship with God. As the previous chapter discussed, the Bible is the dwelling and communication of God with His people. God pursues relationship with His people by speaking through the stories, poetry, prophecy, and pages of Scripture. The Bible is the powerful Word of God to His people that displays God's character, communicates His love and will for His people, and powerfully transforms the lives of earnest seekers.

Although the Word of God is the transformational textbook for the Christian life, research demonstrates that many Christians are not spending daily time in the Bible. The 2016 survey on the "State of the Bible" by the American Bible Society and Barna Group concluded that "two-thirds of Americans believe the Bible contains everything a person needs to know in order to live a meaningful life." However, only "one-third of Americans profess to reading the Bible at least once per week" (American Bible Society, & Barna Group, 2016).

One might think this data does not represent the lives of Seventh-day Adventist church members because of their self-declaration as "people of the Book" and their

beliefs based on “sola scriptura” (by Scripture alone). The fundamental beliefs of the Seventh-day Adventist Church affirm the sacredness of the Bible and its importance in the lives of disciples of Jesus. The Church teaches that disciples should spend time daily “feeding” and “meditating” on the Word of God, as it is essential for spiritual growth and transformation in Christ (“Seventh-day Adventist Church,” 2016). Therefore, one could conclude that Seventh-day Adventist church members certainly must spend more time in the Word of God than the average American; however, personal pastoral observations and research would contradict this assumption. Time spent in the Word of God is a challenge for Seventh-day Adventist church members just as it is for other Christians.

Beagles, in an interview with Knott observes,

A deeper life with Jesus has always been one of the ‘givens’ of Adventism. . . We assumed in our writings and preaching that people knew how to enrich their prayer life, how to find greater meaning in their Bible study, how to ‘grow in grace’ and enjoy sharing their faith. Maybe there was a time in the early years of this movement when that could safely be assumed, but it’s not a “given” anymore. (Knott, 2011, p. 19)

Former President of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, J. Paulsen, writes of this challenge in the Adventist church. While affirming the Seventh-day Adventist Church’s foundation of Scripture and its emphasis on teaching people to “stay close to the Book,” he says,

Yet the sad fact is that far too many of our people spend little or no time reading the Bible. They limit their spiritual nurture as far as the actual reading of the Word of God is concerned to what is being served when they attend a meeting—what is being read to them in church. They don’t spend time themselves in the Bible—or very, very little time studying the Scriptures. (cited in Satelmajer & Huchs, 2009)

Both Beagles and Paulson are suggesting that our assumptions of the depth of member’s Scripture experience have been inaccurate. Despite the Seventh-day Adventist Church’s emphasis on Scripture, many members lack meaningful personal time in Scripture.



This leads to the question: Why, even when taught the importance of Scripture, are members and disciples not spending more personal time in the Word of God? Could it be that people are not spending time in the Word of God because they are not being disciplined and nurtured in this practice? Research has been conducted to assess the current state of the church and the spiritual health of Christians, and one such study conducted by Faith Communities Today in 2010 surveyed multiple Christian religions, including Seventh-day Adventists. Over 11,000 pastors and lay leaders were asked if they would agree to this statement: “Our congregation is spiritually vital and alive.” Only 16% of surveyed Seventh-day Adventists responded with “strongly agree.” In analyzing this data, Seventh-day Adventist researcher Sahlin says, “There does appear to be a spiritual decline across the country, and Adventist churches seem to be down along with all of the other denominations.” And while in Spring of 2011 *USA Today* reported that the fastest growing church is the Seventh-day Adventist denomination, Sahlin suggests “there is less plowing and sowing and nurturing going on while there is an increase in harvest activity” (2011, p. 28). While the church may be growing numerically, it is not necessarily growing or thriving spiritually. A potential reason for this is the lack of sowing and nurturing of faith practices such as teaching members how to spend time Scripture. In essence, there is a lack of on-going discipleship of church members. People are joining the fellowship of church but not enjoying the meaningful fellowship of a growing relationship with God.

Spiritual vitality and discipleship practices, such as meaningful time in God’s Word of God, cannot be assumed to be present among church members. Beagles observes,

The worldly culture around us certainly tries to draw us away from God, and if we don't intentionally plan to build up our lives in Christ, we shouldn't be so surprised that so many Adventists don't know much about "abiding in Christ." (Beagles, quoted in Knott, 2011, p. 19)

There is a need within Christianity and specifically the Seventh-day Adventist Church for spiritual "revival and transformation in our denomination" (Sahlin, 2011, p. 28). This would include an emphasis on abiding in Christ and His Word, with practical instruction on reading Scripture for transformation and relationship with God.

While the previous chapter laid out the biblical foundations for reading the Bible for relationship with God, this chapter will continue to explore this subject through the research of pastors, authors, and scholars. While the totality of literature cannot be exhaustively surveyed in the context of this project, current and classic spiritual discipline literature will be reviewed. Using the framework of the small group model presented in class (A. Walshe, personal communication, 2013), along with Scripture and the writings of Ellen White, this survey of literature served as the foundation for the development of Scripture reflection groups in the Walla Walla University Church.

While the purpose of a literature review is to enter into conversation with prominent scholars in a given field of study, this poses a challenge in the field of biblical spirituality. Within the Seventh-day Adventist Church, there currently is a climate of suspicion regarding spiritual formation. Many prominent authors in this field are viewed by some to be promoters of a dangerous form of spirituality. While some authors included in this literature review may concern some readers of this chapter, three distinctions are relevant: (a) controversial authors or their works were not included in the assigned reading, or referenced or cited in our classes; (b) the inclusion of these authors is not meant as an endorsement of the entirety of their work; and (c) the Bible was the

standard by which all resources were evaluated, and was the ultimate criteria for their inclusion in this literature review. Any unbiblical approaches to spirituality were not included or endorsed by this review.

As discussed in the previous chapter, the totality of Scripture describes a deep, rich, intimate and life-giving experience to be had with God and His Word. Sadly, many professed believers are not experiencing this formational relationship with God. The following review will uncover some potential challenges that keep people from spending more time in the Word of God. This discussion will then highlight three main principles of reading Scripture for relationship with God: reception, reflection, and reciprocation.

### **Spending Time in Scripture: Challenges and Opportunities**

Research reveals that “the average ‘Bible consumer’ . . . owns nine Bibles and is looking for more.” Foster (2008) concludes that this data reveals “a deep and abiding sense of *lack*—a sense that we have not really achieved a grasp of the Bible that is adequate to our needs” (pp. 3-4). It is not another Bible or another translation that will satisfy one’s sense of lack, but rather time spent in communion with the Word of God. Therefore, before discussing how to spend time in the Scripture, it is helpful to look at reasons for the lack of time spent in the abundance of the Word of God. Following is a selection of commonly observed challenges that can contribute to a deficit in personal, transformational Bible reading.

#### **Challenge: Discipleship Definition Confusion**

As mentioned, a common reason why many Christians do not spend personal and meaningful time in the Word of God is that they have not been discipled and nurtured in

this practice. This can arise from one's definition of discipleship. Jim Putman (2010) observes that there is confusion regarding the definition of discipleship and often pastors and church leaders do not define discipleship in the same way (pp. 25-26). Many, in their discussion and teaching of discipleship, will emphasize evangelism and the making of disciples. However, there is more to discipleship than the initial conversion. Laurie (2009) notes, "It is my conviction that every disciple is a believer, but not every believer is necessarily a disciple" (p. 13). This implies that one can be a professed Christian yet not practice discipleship; that one can be *converted* but not *conformed* to life with Jesus.

This lack of discipleship after conversion demonstrates the need for further spiritual development, beyond initial belief, which nurtures one's on-going discipleship journey. Malphurs (2009) makes this important distinction: "People become disciples through evangelism. Then they grow as Christians through the process of discipleship." While evangelism and conversion are essential in the making of a disciple, discipleship's formational work is an "on-going process that encourages the believer to follow Christ and become more like him" (pp. 33-34). Evangelist and Seventh-day Adventist Church leader Mark Finley (2009) confirms that discipleship involves on-going faith formation, and that the church must intentionally plan means to nurture disciples beyond conversion (p. 10). Could it be that the church assumes the work of discipleship was complete at baptism, therefore no one helps nurture believers' on-going faith formation? Literature shows that discipleship is a process of growing, transformational communion with Jesus; consequently, if the church is going to be involved in the process of discipleship there is a need for intentional, continued discipleship of members beyond conversion and baptism (Burrill, 1998, pp. 53-55; Malphurs, 2009, pp. 33-34; Putman, 2010, p. 22).

## Challenge: How to Read the Bible

Multiple obstacles can prevent some from reading the Bible, but frequently they simply do not know how. H. G. Hendricks and W. D Hendricks (2007) noted this, observing reasons such as “I need something that works” and “I just can’t seem to make it interesting.” The authors also found that one of the primary struggles people encountered with reading the Bible was understanding its relevance for one’s life (pp. 14-15). These observations speak to the same underlining problem: not knowing how to read the Bible in a personally meaningful way, one that brings life, light, and applicable relevance resulting in life transformation.

An examination of published Seventh-day Adventist Bible study lessons demonstrates how the church emphasizes information over relationship as the goal of Bible study. Lessons on the Bible frequently concentrate on teaching people facts about the Bible and proving its validity and authority. While lessons on Christian living and spiritual growth concentrate on teaching the necessity of reading the Bible and time spent in prayer, these often fail to teach people *how* to pursue these discipleship practices. Consequently, it is possible that one could complete a series of published Seventh-day Adventist Bible studies and know how to mine the Scriptures for doctrinal truth but remain uncertain about how to read Scripture to hear from God, grow in relationship with Him, or apply Scripture to one’s daily life.

Another concern is that people can read Scripture yet be left untouched by its transformative power. Author Chris Webb tells the story of a man who died shortly after reading the Bible through every month for 12 years. His nephew said of him that he had remained a mean and bitter man to the end. Webb (2011) observes, “It’s the tragic story

of too many Christians and churches: soaked in Scripture, yet in the end completely untouched” (p. 32). Personal pastoral observation has demonstrated that this story is not an isolated example and that, all too often, people can read Scripture, gaining information about the Bible but not experiencing its transformative power. Therefore, there is a need for intentional discipleship in how to not only read Scripture, but how to read in such a way that one experiences formational relationship with God.

#### Challenge: Time and Distractions

A common explanation given for not spending time reading the word of God is: I just don’t have time (Hendricks & Hendricks, 2007, p. 17). Taking time out of one’s routine of busy activity can be one of the first and most difficult challenges in spending time in God’s Word (Mason & Miranda, 2013, p. 26). Swenson (2004) defines this problem as lack of “margin” in life: a lack of time and energy that has painful effects on one’s quality of life and capacity to read Scripture and connect with God. Swenson calls this lack of margin a disease, saying, “People are tired and frazzled. People are anxious and depressed. People don’t have time to heal anymore. There is a psychic instability in our day that prevents peace from implanting itself very firmly in the human spirit” (p. 16). Swenson concludes that there is a need in every life to adopt a slower pace with more margin of time, affirming that “speed does not yield devotion” (p. 121). The press and strain of everyday life keeps people busy, distracted, and burdened with seemingly little time to pause, pray, read, and reflect on Scripture. However, true discipleship devotion requires one to slow down, to carve out margin in one’s life in order to have time and energy to commune with God. This will not only affect one’s overall health and happiness but will deepen relationship with God.

The difficulty with busyness and distractions keeping one from time with God is exemplified in this pastor's personal experience with a group of fifth and sixth graders. While discussing the weekly challenge of spending at least five minutes daily with God, one student objected saying that between school work, sports, television, and video games he was just too busy to spend five minutes a day with God. While the student said he was "too busy," it was actually multiple distractions that resulted in his "lack of time." One may laugh at the idea of a young student being too busy, but adult excuses are often similar. Excuses of stress and demands of time can mask a fundamental problem of one's desire. Before one can make time with God a priority, one must have a desire to be with God. "No amount of discipline or exercise or reading will do it if there is no desire" (Postema, 1997, p. 19). As a disciple desires relationship with God, and prioritizes this time to commune with God, they will find that this sacred time delivers them from the bondage of perceived time constraints and distractions and restores "freedom to overloaded lives" (Swenson, 2004, pp. 121-128).

#### Challenge: Worry and Fear

As Barton (2010) observes, a significant challenge to beneficial Bible reading can come from an inner resistance caused by worry and fear, which can ambush those seeking closeness with God, distancing a disciple from that which he or she needs most (pp. 45-49). Just as fear kept the disciple Peter from walking on water with Jesus because Peter focused on the crashing waves around him, fear can prevent modern disciples from looking to Jesus and experiencing the benefits of walking intimately and miraculously with Him (Matt 14:22-33).

Additionally, Barton explains that disciples frequently avoid taking time with God

because of a fear of quietness (p. 47). As has been discussed, many lives are bombarded with the press of time and distractions; people become accustomed to activity and noise to the point that times of stillness and quietness are foreign and cause fear and anxiety. Yet Scripture says that this is what disciples need most. It is times of quietness with God that brings strength (Isa 30:15). It is in stillness that a disciple knows more fully the presence of God (Ps 41:10). The practice of quietness and solitude with God were demonstrated in the life of Jesus as essential to His life and ministry (Johnson, 2009, pp. 13-15), yet Scripture says that many reject this spiritual posture (Isa 30:15; John 16:12). Could it be that fear is keeping disciples from that which could bring them the most strength and satisfaction? (Barton, 2010, pp. 34-37; Calhoun, 2005, pp. 107-115).

As Dr. Thomas, Dean of the School of Theology at Walla Walla University observes, there is another fear that plagues the Seventh-day Adventist Church: The fear of deception and, in particular, fear of spiritual practices themselves (Thomas, 2012, p. 44). Fear in the Seventh-day Adventist Church over spiritual deception has grown along with the teaching that there is a wrong or destructive way to pursue spiritual disciplines. This fear has grown from the idea that some spiritual practices, such as meditation, have roots in eastern religions and therefore are dangerous for Christians. Speaking against the spread of this fear Thomas says, “Astonishingly, and very cunningly, the key avenue for the devil to perpetrate his designs is thought to be by way of devotional exercises themselves.” He continues, “Even the simple act of sitting in silence while meditating is feared as a possible avenue for the devil” (Thomas, 2012, p. 44). Certainly, some methods may not be biblical and could be potentially dangerous, but greater than the danger of conducting spiritual practices in a deceptive way is the



danger of not doing them at all and therefore missing the connection with God that disciples need most (Dybdahl, 2008, p. 61). Distinctions between Christian devotional practices and eastern religious practice can be reviewed further in Appendix B.

Being told in Matthew 24 and 1 Thessalonians 5 that the time before Jesus returns would include deception and would come “as a thief in the night” has produced a vigilant fear of deception. It has caused some Christians to appoint themselves as one on a watch tower (Isa 21:5-6). A problem with this fearful focus is that it was never the focus of Jesus’ words during His three-year ministry, or of His description of the time before His second coming. Additionally, fear and deception are not the focus of the teaching of Jesus in 1 Thessalonians 5. While the text mentions the soon coming of Jesus and possible deception, it encourages disciples to have faith, love, and hope, and to focus on salvation through Jesus Christ. These verses are not a call for vigilant attention to potential deception, but rather a call to look to Jesus and cling to hope in Him. Fear of deception and obsession with end-time signs is destructive because it is a distortion of the Word of God and the call of God to His people in the midst of difficulty. The Bible affirms that “perfect love casts out all fear” (1 John 4:18) and “God has not given us the spirit of fear; but of power, and love, and of a sound mind” (2 Tim 1:7). The call of scriptural discipleship is to relationship with Jesus whose love extinguishes fear.

### Opportunities in Challenges

Research demonstrates that many professed Christians do not spend meaningful time in the Word of God, but also reveals that many have a deep desire to know God and to know how to spend time in His Word. The 2016 survey on the “State of the Bible” by the American Bible Society and Barna Group found that 62% of Americans “express a

desire to read the Bible more often.” Over half of all Americans desire to read Scripture more but many may need someone to disciple them in this practice. This highlights the great opportunity churches have to be involved in the on-going work of discipleship, teaching, encouraging, and providing opportunities for disciples to learn how to read Scripture for relationship with God.

Many Christian authors have described desire for God as a hunger or thirst, noting that this craving of the soul is one that only relationship with God can satisfy (Dybdahl, 2008, p. 11; Rensberger, 2000, pp. 20-21; Tucker, 2007, pp. 18-19). This hunger and thirst for God and His Word is a longing for deep, intimate relationship with God, not just information about God (Dybdahl, p. 11). Finley (2011) affirms “A heart hungering for spiritual revival is a heart that longs for a more intimate experience with Jesus. It isn’t satisfied with a shallow, superficial experience. It craves much more” (p. 6).

This hunger and thirst for God should not be overlooked or ignored but rather be a catalyst for spiritual revival. Dybdahl (2008) writes,

The hunger for God is not to be denied, squelched, suppressed, or reasoned away. God has placed it in us to be nurtured, cherished, and satisfied as only He can do. He meant it to draw us on a quest, a search, a pilgrimage to find Him. (p. 19)

One’s spiritual hunger and thirst is to be a sign that spiritual nourishment is needed. The hunger and thirst of Seventh-day Adventist Church members for an experience in the Word of God should signal an opportunity for the church to lead people to drink from the Water of Life (John 4:14) that can quench parched souls and to partake of the Bread of Life (John 6:35) that alone will satisfy hungry hearts.

While there is currently a need and opportunity within the Seventh-day Adventist Church to teach people relationship with God and how to meet Him in His Word, the

church has a long history of emphasizing the centrality of Scripture and the importance of relationship with Jesus. It is this foundation and history that can ground the church today as it grows to provide teaching, resources, and opportunities for discipleship in relationship with God through His Word.

The following pages explore the foundational discipleship practice of reading Scripture for relationship with God, the goal of which is to guide people in learning to meet God in Scripture and hear His voice through His living Word; thus, people's hunger and thirst will be satisfied by an on-going relationship and transformative experience with God.

### **Reading Scripture for Relationship**

Many Christian pastors and authors write about the spiritual practices that help disciples grow in relationship with God and enable disciples to be available for transformational work of God in one's life (Dybdahl, 2008; Tucker, 2007; Ortberg, 2002; Whitney, 1991; White, 1892; Barton, 2006; Johnson, 2009; Hull, 2006; Hudson, 2010). These spiritual practices are often called spiritual disciplines as they are the spiritual subjects in which a disciple trains in godliness. These spiritual disciplines are the means by which a disciple spends time with God and experiences His transformational presence. These practices are not the source or power of transformation but allow one to be available for relationship with Jesus who is the author and finisher of one's faith (Foster, 2008, p. 13; Ortberg, 2002, pp. 42-44; Heb 12:2).

There are many spiritual practices, including prayer, praise, fasting, quietness and solitude with God, spiritual retreats, gathering in community, observing a weekly Sabbath, and reading Scripture. However, A. Walshe (Personal communication, 2011)

insists, as do many other pastors and Christian authors, that reading Scripture is a foundational discipleship practice, as it is a primary way one knows and experiences God (Graybeal & Roller, 2006, p. 23; Wilson, Finley, Miranda, & Page, 2011; Tucker, 2007, p. 147). Reading Scripture is the focus of this project because “Scripture itself is the primary means for the discovery, instruction, and practice of the spiritual disciplines, which bring us all the more fully into the *with* God life” (Foster, 2008, p. 13). The Bible is a book of stories about the “with God” life, and time spent reading Scripture is the means by which one communes with God and learns how to live the “with-God” life. It is spending time with God in Scripture that brings spiritual life, renewal, and revival (Graybeal & Roller, p. 23; Wilson et al., 2011).

As with all of the spiritual disciplines, the purpose of reading Scripture is to know God and to experience formational relationship with God (Tucker, 2007, p. 147). Speaking of the Bible, Tozer says it “is not only a book which was spoken, but a book which is now speaking” (1982, pp. 81-81). However, practical questions may be asked. How does one read the Bible to hear God speak into one’s life? How does one read Scripture in such a way as to experience relationship with God? The following pages will show three important principles that help answer these questions: reception, reflection, and reciprocity. While examining these principles, specific discipleship practices will be discussed.

### **Reception: Unclenching One’s Hands to Receive God**

Before one can fully experience God in their life, one’s heart must be receptive and open to the formative presence of God. Hudson (2010) tells the story of a congregation that was asked, during worship, to clench their fists for a portion of the

service, and then they were asked to unclench their fists and continue to worship. One person attending the service said, “Somehow I stopped resisting and slowly opened my hands to God” (pp. 47-48). This illustration demonstrates the difference of metaphorical clenched or unclenched fists in one’s ability to receive God and experience His formational work. Hudson says, “Clenched fists distance us from the intimacy and friendship that God desires to share with us . . . open hands express our heart’s desire to receive all that God longs to give.” Hudson goes on to say that unclenching our symbolic spiritual fists is “our inward willingness to let God be God in our lives, and let him lead and guide us” (pp. 47-48).

Christian authors write about the posture of unclenched fists and receptivity to God as submission to God’s control, surrender of one’s will, vulnerability of heart, and yielding oneself to God (Foster, 1998, p. 111; Ortberg, 2002, p. 183; Murray, 1984, p. 144). According to these authors it is through the acts of submitting, surrendering, yielding, and becoming vulnerable that one’s heart is opened to the work of the Spirit of Christ in and through them. Being receptive to the work of God is about making space for God in one’s heart, mind, and life. This must be a disciple’s first spiritual practice. However, how does one unclench their fists and become receptive to the transformative Spirit of God? This is answered, in part, through spiritual practices that enable one to be receptive to the voice of God. As a disciple spends time with God through Scripture, the essential receptive practices of time spent in prayer, quietness, and solitude with God create space in one’s heart and life to hear from God through His Word. We will now take a closer look at these practices.

## Prayer

Many Christian authors write on the importance of prayer (Tucker, 2007; Miller, 2009; Howard, 1999; Whitney, 1991; Foster, 1998; Dybdahl, 2008; Samaan, 1995). Prayer is a vital way one is receptive and makes space for God by inviting Him to speak, to lead, and form one's life. White writes, "Prayer is the opening of the heart to God as to a friend. Not that it is necessary in order to make known to God what we are, but in order to enable us to receive Him" (1892, p. 93). Communing with God begins with prayer, because "prayer places us consciously in the presence of God" (Martin, 1998, p. 60). As one sets out to read the Word of God it is essential to pray, inviting God to speak, and then continue in prayer, listening for His voice through His Word, expecting God to speak (Ortberg, 2002, p. 183-184).

## Quietness and Solitude With God

As Barton (2010) notes, quietness and solitude with God are vital as "means through which we regularly make ourselves available to God for the intimacy of relationship and for the work of transformation that only God can accomplish" (p. 36). The spiritual practice of spending time in quietness with God is a way to help still the clamor of life so that one can discern the voice of God (Whitney, 1991, p. 186). As mentioned in the previous chapter, Jesus, our example, routinely spent time in solitude to commune with God in the silence of the early morning hours. As the story of Elijah exemplifies (1 Kgs 19:9-13), God's voice is like a whisper, still and soft. God does not shout above the noise, or push past the distractions. God speaks in the intimacy of relationship, in the quiet of one's soul. That is why intentional times of quiet are so

important if one is to hear God in Scripture; they enable one to be more attentive to the voice of God (Johnson, 1996, p. 127; Dybdahl, 2008, pp. 92-93; Dennis, 2005, p. 12).

Speaking of the importance of this, Barton (2006) writes,

It is a place in time that is set apart for God and God alone, a time when we unplug and withdraw from the noise of interpersonal interactions, from the noise, busyness and constant stimulation associated with life in the company of others . . . [and] from the constant stimulation of life in the company of others but also from our own addiction to noise, words and activity. It creates a space for listening. (p. 3)

It is in this space of quietness with God that one can experience God's presence and hear His voice; a voice calling people to the rest and peace that only comes in His presence (Matt 11:28-30).

As mentioned previously, some avoid times of quiet and solitude with God out of fear, such as a fear of loneliness, a sense of abandonment, a fear of what might come to the surface of the heart and mind if one slows down enough. However, one must learn by experience that "true solitude is not loneliness but fulfillment" (Dybdahl, 2008, p. 93). It is in quiet moments alone with God and His Word that fears are dissolved, the reassuring and loving voice of God is heard, and one's emptiness is filled with the companionship of His presence.

### **Reflection: Abiding in the Word of God**

Biblical reflection is a foundational practice of reading the Bible for relationship; this is also commonly referred to as biblical mediation. These terms are used to describe a way of reading Scripture that involves "deep thinking on the truths and spiritual realities revealed in Scripture for the purpose of understanding, application, and prayer" (Whitney, 1991, p. 48). Tucker (2007) summarizes the purpose of biblical mediation saying,

Biblical meditation encourages us to fill the mind with Scripture or with thoughts of God's character or mighty deeds. In so doing, we make Him the center of our attention instead of self or our problems. . . We meditate on God in order that we might know Him, love Him, and serve Him. (p. 80)

Biblical meditation is all about God, with the purpose of knowing Him and lovingly communing with Him. It is through biblical reflection or meditation that one experiences God and seeks the “infilling and the transformation that His presence brings” (Dybdahl, 2008, p. 61).

Note, while Christianity has a long and rich tradition of biblical meditation that differs in key ways from Eastern meditation, there still remains some confusion around the use of the word “meditation” (Whitney, 1991, pp. 47-48; Johnson, 2004, p. 31; Dybdahl, 2008, p. 61). As these distinctions are not the focus of the chapter, further explanation of the differences between biblical meditation and Eastern meditation can be reviewed in Appendix B.

As prayer is essential to opening the heart to God, it is also fundamental to biblical meditation as one reflects on Scripture and listens for the Holy Spirit to apply Scripture to one's life. Johnson writes on the practice of prayer in biblical meditation saying, “We are dialoguing with God. God speaks to us in Scripture and we respond in prayer” (2004, p. 22). The spiritual practice of prayer and biblical meditation are intrinsically and intimately intertwined. The reading of Scripture should be marinated in prayer: before reading Scripture, one should pray; as one reads Scripture, one should pray; as a response to Scripture, one should pray. In this way, reflecting on Scripture is prayer to God (Graybeal & Roller, 2006, pp. 23-25; Martin, 1998, pp. 87-92). Prayer is the *context* in which one dwells with God and Scripture is the *content* of time with God and prayers to Him. The connection of prayer and Scripture is a spiritual dance of



invitation and acceptance, listening and responding while savoring God's presence through His Word.

In the following section we will look more closely at the practice of reflecting on Scripture and will examine some key differences between studying Scripture for information and reading Scripture for relationship and transformation.

### Informational Versus Transformational Reading

Deep and meaningful relationship with God is not dependent on specific Bible translations, Bible reading plans, or length of time praying or reading Scripture. As Finley points out, if healthy spirituality was assessed by the number of hours in prayer or Bible Study, "the Pharisees should have been the most spiritual people on the planet." It is possible to spend hours in prayer and in Scripture yet remain untouched by relationship with Jesus (Finley, 2011). Finley and Dybdahl both note that what makes the difference in one's time in Scripture and prayer is one's intent. Dybdahl (2008) refers to this intent as "holy purpose" (p. 68). This holy purpose is a foundational difference between mere studying for information and reading for relationship with God and life transformation. Often the purpose of studying Scripture is to gain information about God and biblical truth, but while informational study has its place, the study of Scripture for information alone cannot transform the reader (pp. 67-68). Of this Johnson (2004) writes,

It's true that those who participate in Bible studies may begin to form an interactive life with God, but too often they switch the focus to correctly filling out the answers to the study questions, participating well in discussion, or listening to other's inspiring stories. None of those things are wrong—they're just not the point: knowing God. (p. 19)

Bible study gives context, helping one to understand the author's intent, but alone this study is incomplete. Johnson (2004) explains that reflection on Scripture for relationship

with God does not negate Bible study; rather, Bible study precedes biblical meditation (p. 19). A summary of differences between informational and transformation is outlined in Figure 1.

<b>Informational Reading</b>	<b>Transformational Reading</b>
Reader is in control, seeking to master the text	Reader let the Holy Spirit be in control, letting one's life to be mastered by the text.
Reader's posture is that of a student, seeking to analyze and dissect the text for knowledge and information	Reader's posture is that of a friend, seeking to marinate in the words and enjoy relationship and communication with God
Reader covers as much material as possible as quickly as possible	Reader reflects on the passages slowly to taste, savor, and digest the words and their meaning
Reader asks informational questions of the text	Reader lets the Holy Spirit, through the text, ask questions of him/herself
Reads to check Scripture reading of a list (either a goal or expectation), or to find quick answers for their concerns.	Reads to hear God speak and to grow in depth of connection with Him

*Figure 1.* Informational vs. transformational Scripture reading. (Taken from Johnson, 2004, pp. 40-43; Mulholland, 2000, pp. 49-63; Ortberg, 2002, p. 187; Stanley, 2009, p. 35).

If one desires to know God and experience God personally, one must wade deeper into an experience with Scripture; formational reading involves soaking in the depths of Scripture, listening for the Holy Spirit to apply it to one's life (Dybdahl, 2008, pp. 67-68). As Spurgeon said, "In order that it [The Word of God] may dwell in you, it must first enter into you. . . . You must really know the spiritual meaning of it. You must believe it, live upon it, drink it in—you must let it soak into your innermost being" (1881, p. 1). Spurgeon goes on to say, "It is not enough to have a Bible on the shelf—it is infinitely better to have its truths stored up within your soul. It is a good thing to carry your Testament in your pocket—it is far better to carry its message in your heart" (pp. 1-2). It is storing up Scripture within one's soul that is the practice of reading Scripture for transformation. As the Word dwells within, souls and hearts are transformed through relationship with God.

### Time and Length of Reading

While there are many differences between study and reflection, two key differences are time and length. In biblical reflection for relationship with God, one moves slowly through small sections of Scripture. Many Bible study plans involve consuming large portions of Scripture in a short span of time; however, as Webb (2011) notes:

These sprints through Scripture have some value in giving us a quick overview of the entire narrative; in the end, they can help us read the Bible more deeply. But in themselves they don't encourage good, prayerful, engaged reading. By all means use them to grasp the big picture. But then slow down. After you've sped through a thousand pages in three months, or a year, pick a good page or two and live with it for the next three months (or a year). Respect the fact that this is Holy ground. Dwell, don't dash. (p. 190)

Scripture reflection involves more, relaxed time, and shorter Scripture passages, with the

goal being the quality of the experience rather than the amount of reading. Biblical meditation is not about “analyzing the words” but instead involves reading the passage slowly and prayerfully, “letting the words be spoken to us by the Holy Spirit to see what impact they will make on us” (Johnson, 2004, p. 22). Tucker (2007) advises, “If it depicts peace, don’t dissect the concept of peace, but just experience peace itself—enter into the reality of Christ’s peace and become absorbed by it” (p. 82). This sort of meditative experience with God takes time; time to savor God’s Word, enjoy His presence, and personally experience the impact of Scripture in one’s life. Speaking to both time and length, Ortberg (2002) writes, “Immerse yourself in short passages of Scripture—perhaps a few verses. Read it slowly. Read it the way you would read a love letter at the height of romance. Certain words may stand out to you; allow them to sink into your heart” (p. 187).

Specific methods of Scripture reflection will be discussed in more detail in the following chapter, however the foundational principals guiding these practices include: reading Scripture with the holy purpose of relationship with God, slowly and thoughtfully reading small passages of Scripture, and taking time to listen as the Holy Spirit speaks the Word of God into one’s life. The ultimate purpose is to not control Scripture but to submit, not to speed through but to savor, not to dissect the words but to allow Scripture to dissect one’s heart.

### **Reciprocation: Sharing God’s Word in Community**

Reading Scripture for relationship with God is both personal and communal. While time alone in the Word of God is a foundational practice of reading Scripture for relationship and transformation, a disciple’s experience with God’s Word is not complete

unless it is read and experienced in the context of relationship with others. As mentioned in Chapter 2, God pursues relationship with people through the experience of spiritual community. Time alone with God and time in spiritual community are integral to reading and experiencing Scripture. A natural result of spending time with God through His Word is to be drawn to spend time in community with others. As Foster (2008) observes, “We learn that reading with genuine understanding leads naturally and appropriately to reading with the People of God” (p. 103). The hymn, “Take Time to be Holy” demonstrates this as it sings, “Take time to be holy, speak oft with thy Lord; Abide in Him Always, and feed on His Word.” This line is directly followed by singing, “Make friends with God’s children” (*Seventh-day Adventist Hymnal*, 1985, #500). It is time alone with Jesus and His Word that leads to community and connection with others.

Reading the Word of God for relationship involves experiencing the Word in the context of spiritual community, because Christ’s followers were designed to follow Him in the context of relationship with others. As Hudson (2010) notes, “Gospel life is life together” (pp. 54-55). As discussed in Chapter 2, Jesus called His disciples into relationship with Himself by calling them into community with other disciples who were also following Him. Jesus formed and taught His disciples in the environment of discipleship community. Just as with New Testament discipleship, relationship with God is not isolated from one’s relationship with others.

God calls His people into community because He created people for relationship. Psychologists Cloud and Townsend (2001) write, “People connected to other people thrive and grow, and those not connected wither and die. It is a medical fact. . . . At an emotional level, connection is the sustaining factor for the psyche, the heart, and the

spirit” (pp. 122-123). Many Christian pastors and authors write of the important role of community in spiritual health and growth, asserting that not only is it vital, it is only in community that disciples grow “attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ” (Eph 4:11-14; Crabb, 1999, pp. xi-xv; Stanley & Willits, 2004, pp. 34-35; Bilezikian, 1997, pp. 15-16; Barton, 2014, pp.13-14; Dybdahl, 2008, p. 82; Tucker, 2007, pp. 67, 69; Hudson, 2010, pp. 54-55). In the poetic words of T. Elliot (1952), “What life have you, if you have not life together? There is not life that is not in community” (p. 101). One’s walk with God is not complete and does not have life abundant if not walked with others; likewise, one’s experience in the Word of God is not complete if not experienced in the context of community.

### Benefits of Reading the Word in Community

Spiritual community is a beneficial context for on-going discipleship because it is in community that disciples “learn how to better love and follow Jesus” (McDonald, 2007, p. 81). As Crabb (1999) notes, it is “*togetherness* in Christ” that “encourages *movement* toward Christ” (p. 22). Experiencing God and His Word in the context of community helps one better follow Jesus and draw closer to Him. There are multiple reasons for this, which we will now explore in greater detail.

### **Community Gives Us a Clearer Picture of God**

As disciples read and live the Word of God together, each person’s experience with God is like a piece of a picture, giving a more complete picture of who God is. Echoing C.S. Lewis, Ortberg (2002) describes this picture of community: “Each person is created to see a different facet of God’s beauty—something no one else can see

in quite the same way—and then to bless all worshipers through all eternity with an aspect of God they could not otherwise see” (p. 53). It is the beauty of God displayed in the life of another that can help one see God in a new way. A disciple can see God more clearly by seeing him lived through the life of another disciple.

### **Community Affirms God’s Voice**

In a world of noise and distraction it can be difficult for one to discern the voice and leading of God because “desires can muddy our ability to hear God’s voice” (Harris, 2015). Other disciples can help to confirm and clarify God’s voice as heard through His Word. Graybeal and Roller (2006) write, “No means of communication between God and us is more commonly used in the Bible or the history of the church than the voice of a definite, individual human being.” They expand on this, saying, “It may be that the one spoken to is also the one spoken through”; the Bible itself is a perfect example of God speaking through the words of human beings (p. 43). At times one may be unable to clearly discern the voice of God for oneself, but may be able to hear Him more clearly through the voice of another. This is an important part of a disciple’s witness to others, for as God speaks into a disciple’s life they in turn share this with others.

### **Community Holds Disciples Accountable**

As Cloud and Townsend (2001) observe, disciples need one another to hold them accountable in their spiritual growth and commitments (pp. 126-127). This loving accountability of community can help motivate disciples to spend daily time in the Word of God. Dybdahl (2008) writes that community “gives us the incentive and courage to grow and keep journeying in our divine quest as we meet with fellow travelers on the

spiritual way.” As an example Dybdahl quotes his friend, saying, ““I have begun jogging—many times. The only times I have kept jogging were the times I did it with others”” (pp. 78-79). As a disciple hears the leading of God through His Word, the accountability of community can urge one to press forward in faith and to live out these convictions.

### **Community Strengthens and Encourages**

Disciples can face discouragement, times when one’s faith is fragile, and it is these times that disciples most need the strength and encouragement of community. In his book, *Life Together*, Bonhoeffer (1954) writes, “The Christian needs another Christian who speaks God’s Word to him. He needs him again and again when he becomes uncertain and discouraged, for by himself he cannot help himself without belying the truth.” Bonhoeffer goes on to say, “The Christ in his own heart is weaker than the Christ in the word of his brother; his own heart is uncertain, his brother’s is sure” (p. 23). It is through community that disciple’s hearts are cheered, faith is fortified, and confidence emboldened.

#### **Small Group Discipleship Community**

While there are various forms of discipleship communities and benefits to each, many pastors and Christian authors testify that the small group context is particularly beneficial for spiritual growth and transformation (Hull, 2006, p. 229; Hudson, 2010, p. 58; Benner, 2002, p. 166; Samaan, 1999, p. 37). Dybdahl (2008) asserts that meaningful community does not take place in large groups, but rather, “real nurture and spiritual growth take place in groups of three to twelve or possibly a home/house church”



(p. 79). In a small group setting people are able to share life and encourage one another in the discipleship journey. Bilezikan (1997) affirms,

It is in small groups that people can get close enough to know each other to care and share, to challenge and support, to confide and confess, to forgive and be forgiven, to laugh and weep together, to be accountable to each other, to watch over each other, and to grow together. . . Small groups are God's gift to foster changes in character and spiritual growth. (p. 54)

Small groups are essential in discipleship because they demonstrate and encourage discipleship practices. Donahue and Robinson (2001) write that small group community is the best way for disciples to “mature through transformational relationships” (p. 32). They say that the focus of such groups is not mere information, but personal transformation in the image of Christ (p. 76). According to Donahue and Robinson, churches with effective discipleship incorporate some form of small group community because they recognize that in this context of relationship people move past knowledge to experience personal transformation (p. 51).

### **Summary**

While the above review of literature is not exhaustive, it provides a foundation for Scripture reflection groups implemented in the Walla Walla University Church. The literature surveyed indicates that while people face various challenges in reading the Word of God, many are hungry to know how to read the Bible for relationship with God and life formation; therefore, there is a great opportunity for the church to provide on-going discipleship in this area.

The literature review reveals that studying Scripture for information is distinct from reading Scripture for relationship and transformation. Reading Scripture for transformation begins with a receptive heart and mind that desires relationship with God.

Scripture reflection practice involves meditating on small passages, taking time to savor and absorb its significance. This includes intentional quiet moments with God for prayer and communion as a disciple opens their life to the formational work of the Spirit. To disciple people in this practice, spiritual community is vital. The reciprocation of trusting, authentic, accountable, discipleship community supports one's growing relationship with God and His Word. Furthermore, small group community deepens one's relationship with others, providing transformational relationships. In conclusion, by incorporating the discipleship practices of reception, reflection, and reciprocation, one can meaningfully experience the Bible for relationship with God, personal transformation, and meaningful connections with others.

## CHAPTER 4

### MAKING SPACE FOR RELATIONSHIP: THE FORMATION AND IMPLEMENTATION OF SCRIPTURE REFLECTION GROUPS

#### **Introduction**

Faith nurture is an essential element of discipleship. This is demonstrated in the New Testament church and the letters written to the various church communities. In these letters disciples are given encouragement (Phil 1:3-6; Heb 10:23), prayed for (Eph 3:14-21; Phil 1:9-11), given instruction (Col 3:4-6; 1 Thess 5:11, 14-14; Eph 4:17-32), reminded of the importance of relationship with Jesus (Eph 2; Col 2:6-7), urged to remain in the Word of God (2 Tim 3:15-17), and pointed to the transformational call of the gospel (Col 1:21-23; 2 Cor 3:18). It was through this intentional discipleship and faith nurture that the gospel was spread, the church grew, faith was strengthened, and the disciples were encouraged to hold on to Jesus, His Word, and the hope of the gospel.

During the October 2016 General Conference Annual Council, Secretary Ng reported on a statistical analysis of former members who had left the Seventh-day Adventist Church. Although the church has approximately 19.5 million members, “In the last 50 years, of every 100 people baptized, 42 did not return, an apostasy rate of 40-42%. And the rate has gone up to 49% in the last five years: of 18 million baptized, we have lost about 9 million” (cited in Dwyer, 2016). Ng concluded that this demonstrates the necessity of faith nurture that is “part of discipleship, part of evangelism, and it should

become part of church culture” (Dwyer). These statistics and recommendations for Seventh-day Adventist congregations confirm a lack of on-going discipleship and faith nurture in many churches, and the need of renewed efforts to disciple members in relationship with Jesus. Ng also asserts that faith nurture in local churches “is best handled by small group ministries” (Dwyer, 2016), suggesting a needed increase in small group ministries in local Seventh-day Adventist Church congregations where members can learn by faith-forming experience in discipleship community.

The need of faith nurture inspired the development of this project, in the hope of providing a means to disciple people in relationship with Jesus and His Word and to connect people in spiritual community. The following discussion will examine how the development of this project accomplished this goal, including the ministry context in which the project was created, essential discipleship spaces, the method of experiential learning, and an example of this type of community in the Seventh-day Adventist Church. This discussion will also survey the Scripture reflection practices included in this experiential learning context and the implementation of this project in the Walla Walla University Church, which could be a resource for faith nurture in the Seventh-day Adventist Church beyond this one local church setting.

### **Ministry Context**

The Walla Walla University Church is located in a small agricultural and academic town in southeastern Washington and is in the Upper Columbia Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, which is one of six conferences in the North Pacific Union. Walla Walla University Church (WWUC) was founded around 1947 and is located on the campus of Walla Walla University in College Place, Washington. In addition to its close

association with Walla Walla University, the church is associated with other Seventh-day Adventist educational institutions including Roger Elementary and Walla Walla Valley Academy. The Walla Walla community is home to a Seventh-day Adventist medical institution, Walla Walla General Hospital. Walla Walla University Church ministers to many of the students and faculty of these educational and health institutions, as well as members in the larger community.

As this project began, church clerk records show WWUC membership in 2012 to be 2,408 members. According to Social Explorer database, the average membership of Seventh-day Adventist churches in Washington State is 176 and the average membership of Seventh-day Adventist churches in the United States is 234 people. Walla Walla University Church has the largest membership in Upper-Columbia Conference and North Pacific Union (Social Explorer). In addition to its official membership, WWUC also serves students of Walla Walla University with an enrollment of over 1,800 students (*Walla Walla University Factbook*, 2014).

There are two main church services in the WWUC sanctuary each Sabbath morning. Church attendance varies depending on the academic calendar. However, weekly attendance at both services averages approximately 1,700 people (“Walla Walla University Church,” 2012). At the time of this project, the leadership of WWUC consisted of five conference-hired pastors and one pastor hired by the local church. These pastors include the senior pastor, administrative pastor, youth pastor, young adult pastor, member care pastor, and pastor for spiritual development. In addition to these pastors, there was a children’s ministry director, a worship director, a director of music, and an intern for community mission.

In 2011, WWUC needed a new pastor to fill an open position on staff. Church leadership took this opportunity to evaluate needs of the church and created a new job description for this pastoral position. As the church pastors, staff, and church board clearly saw that the church was heavily invested in ministry to young people (children, youth, and young adults) but offered few intentional discipleship opportunities for the adult members or those who were not associated with the academic institutions, church leadership saw the need for a pastor to purposefully lead and plan discipleship opportunities to develop and nurture the spiritual lives of the church members. The result was the creation of the position of pastor for spiritual development.

### **Understanding the Need**

I was hired for the position of pastor for spiritual development and joined the staff in June 2011. Stepping into a new, large church, it was my task to quickly assess the church community and to initiate and grow an intentional ministry for spiritual development. From church profile data in general, one can see that the number and scope of people to be reached and ministered to is large and varied. Given this ministry context and the desire of church leadership to grow members spiritually, initial questions included: What are the most pressing spiritual needs of this group? What are possible ways to ministers to these needs? The response to such questions revealed the interests and needs of the adult membership at WWUC, such as specific spiritual opportunities for parents of young children, discipleship for marriages, spiritual retreats, women's ministry, and book groups.

Certain members sought spiritual counsel with the specific desire to know more about how to read the Bible. One woman, who had attended WWUC for years, came to

me in tears and wanted to be baptized. She cried as she told me that she had not decided to be baptized before this point in her life because, while she had gone through two sets of Bible studies with two previous pastors, she still did not know how to read Scripture and have a relationship with God. She said, “I don’t know how to read the Bible in a way that is meaningful to my life. I don’t know how to hear God through His Word.” Her story echoed the stories of others I heard repeated in my office and in the hallways of the church. A common thread in these stories was the desire for a deeper experience in God’s Word.

In assessing the needs at WWUC, another common desire expressed was a longing for church community connection. Multiple people shared how they felt isolated and lost in such a large congregation. A common story was of those who had attended WWUC for years yet felt they did not truly know anyone; no deep connection or formative fellowship had developed over years of attendance. Researching the various ministries of the church revealed no official small group opportunities available. Several unofficial small groups had been meeting for years but were closed to new attendees. It became clear that many WWUC members needed discipleship opportunities in reading and experiencing God’s Word, as well as small groups that functioned to assist members in connecting meaningfully outside the weekly worship service.

In seeking to utilize Seventh-day Adventist resources, such as Bible studies, lessons and books to guide disciples in how to spend time in Scripture and experience God through His Word, I discovered very few materials that addressed this topic. I found a wealth of materials on doctrine and prophesy, a plethora of devotional books, ample materials on marriage and the family, and many commentaries on various books of the

Bible, but only a few dedicated to spiritual practices of discipleship and almost none that addressed ways to reflect on Scripture for relationship with God. This demonstrates a greater need within the denomination for applicable materials and resources available to disciple individuals in spiritual disciplines in general, and particularly the practice of reflecting on God's Word.

The psalmist David called God's Word a lamp to his feet and a light to his path. Without a relationship with God through His Word, disciples are without clear direction in their spiritual journey. While certainly there are church members who have a thriving relationship with God, spend meaningful time in His Word daily, and have meaningful community with other believers, the unfortunate reality is that there are many others who need encouragement in their relationship with God, who struggle to know how to spend time in His Word, and who feel isolated in their faith journey. It was in consideration of this latter group that this project was developed, with the primary goal of helping group participants make space in their lives for formative time in God's Word and experientially learn within a discipleship community, and through these formative spaces, grow in their relationship with God.

### **Development of Bible Reflection Groups**

#### **The Context: Space for Relationship**

Fundamental to discipleship is the call to enter sacred space with God. In Scripture, space has significance, and there is a call for God's people to enjoy holy space with Him. The Hebrew word for Egypt, *Mitzrayim*, often means "to shut" or "to limit" but other commentators note that it also means "restricted place" or "narrow place" and indeed, for the Jews in the Old Testament, Egypt was a narrow, restrictive place of



bondage (Brown, Driver, Briggs, 2004, p. 595; Young, 2008). In contrast, when speaking of God's deliverance, Old Testament authors speak of this freedom saying that God brought them to "a spacious place." This spacious place is God's answer to His people's cry for help (Ps 118:5); it is a place to which God woos His people in order to comfort them (Job 36:16); it is a safe place of rescue and refuge (2 Sam 22:20; Ps 18:19); and it is a place of freedom from the pressing strains of life (Ps 118:5). These holy, spacious places are God's answer to the narrow places of bondage that restrict His people from living fully in the abundant life of God (John 10:10).

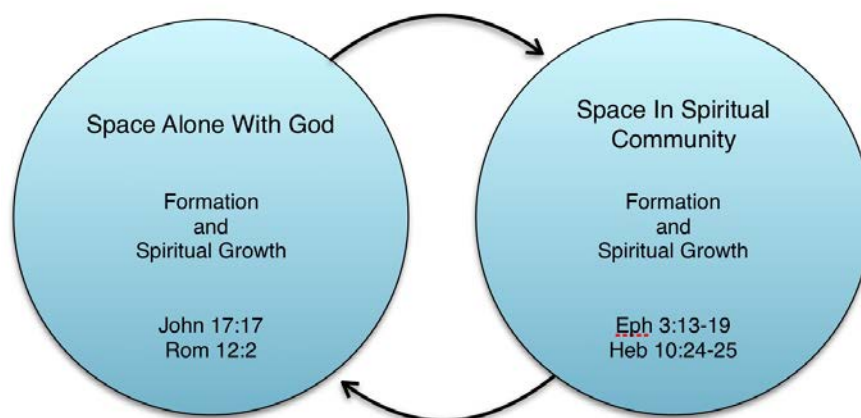
This significance of space is apparent from the beginning, as God first created space and then filled it with life, beauty, and meaning. Since the beginning of creation God has called people to a sacred space with Him and then has filled this space of holy communion with His transformative presence. This call to a sacred space is represented in the use of the Hebrew word *Selah* throughout Psalms and Habakkuk. Johnson (2004) notes that this word *Selah* occurs 71 times in the book of Psalms and three times in Habakkuk. *Selah* always directly follows a line of Scripture. While *Selah* is not a word for meditation, many scholars agree that it is a reminder to the reader to pause, to meditate on that particular point, to take a moment to reflect and listen for the voice, leading, and presence of God (p. 30). *Selah* is the call to make space for God, to make space to reflect, to process and to savor the spaciousness of God's Word.

This call to make space for God can also be seen in the initial preaching of the Gospel and proclamation of the presence of Jesus in this world. It was prophesied that John the Baptist's life work and message would be, "Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for Him" (Mark 1:3). John the Baptist's life ministry would be a call for

people to make space in their hearts and lives to receive Jesus who was already in their midst. The message of John the Baptist continues today, calling disciples to make space for Jesus' in-filling presence, space in which to commune with Him, hear His voice, and experience His transformative presence.

Jesus taught that the greatest act one can do is to make space in one's heart, soul, and mind to love God and love others, so it follows that in addition to making space for Jesus disciples are called to make space for one another. All other discipleship practices "hang on these" life spaces of love (Matt 22:36-40). It is within this space of discipleship community that disciples are instructed to "encourage one another" and "stir one another to love and good works" (Heb 10:24-25).

The spaces of communion with God and community with others are essential in the life of those who desire to follow Jesus. Indeed, Jesus modeled the importance of both transformative spaces as He spent time alone with God and time ministering in the context of discipleship community. It is the interchange between these two sacred discipleship spaces that feed and support each other, producing spiritual life and vitality (as seen in Figure 2).



*Figure 2.* Interdependence of discipleship spaces.

It is in personal, alone space with God that one experiences His infilling presence, hears His voice and is formed in His image. This process of formation propels disciples into spaces of community, for as previously discussed, God is a God of community and He forms His people in community (Foster, 2002, p. 103). Additionally, it is in the space of spiritual community that disciples experience God's continued formational work through one another, through the "loving environment of communion and community . . . an atmosphere conducive of reciprocal caring, mutual trust, and a sense of belonging . . . reaching their potential in the power of the Holy Spirit" (Samaan, 1999, p. 37). As a result of being in this space with others, disciples are inspired and encouraged to grow in their own relationship with God by spending more time in communion with Him (Hull, 2006, p. 229; Hull, 2007, pp. 215-217). It is in these two discipleship spaces of time with God and time in community that God's love is experienced and lived out in one's life, and it is in these two spaces that one grows in relationship with God and in relationship with others.

While these two spaces are essential in the lives of disciples, many feel that the stresses and distractions of life crowd them out. Many disciples face challenges creating these holy spacious places in their lives, what Swenson calls "margin" (Swenson, 2004); but it is this margin that would deliver God's people from the burdens that seek to oppress them. It is this struggle with making space, and God's call into transformative space with Him and with His people, that has been the inspiration for the formation of Scripture reflection groups in WWUC. The goal of the Scripture reflection groups in WWUC was to provide space for discipleship community that would encourage and inspire members to make space for personal time with God and His Word, and to help

members experience the power of God's Word in community with others. The following sections will look more closely at a method of discipleship within the space of community, examine an example of discipleship community, and explore suggestions for content for time spent with God in His Word.

### The Method: Experiential Learning, the Way of Discipleship

Experiential learning is a method of discipleship that demonstrates the practices of making space for God and for community. Experiential learning is defined as “education characterized by active learning experiences . . . [where] learners are active participants in constructing meaning and in their own development” (Kemp, 2010, p. 118). Lewis and Williams define experiential learning as simply “learning from experience or learning by doing” (cited in Hedin, 2010, p. 108). A key element in learning experiences is community. Trester (1982) notes:

Adult learning theorists stress that adults learn best in a community atmosphere fostering cooperation, caring, and mutual respect. . . To achieve adult faith the ordinary adult needs community challenge and community wisdom to facilitate this growth. . . He explains that many of the problems in churches could be addressed through small learning communities. (p. 540)

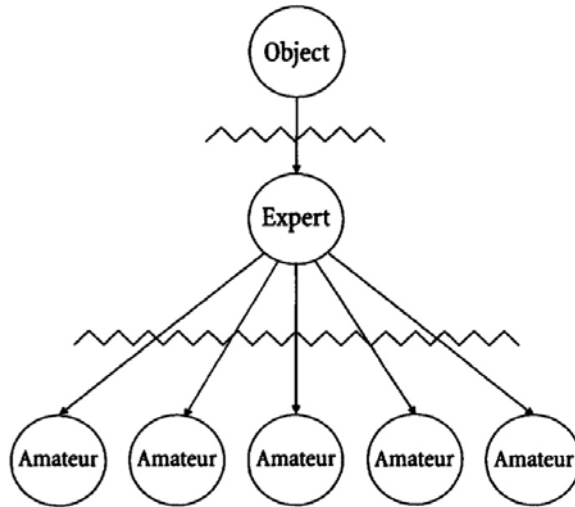
So it seems that effective experiential learning involves learning by doing within community, and applied to discipleship, it is through experiential learning that disciples experience God firsthand and personally learn and apply discipleship practices. Additionally, it is in experiential learning that disciples gather to learn and experience God *with* one another (A. Walshe, personal communication, 2013).

Jesus employed experiential learning in forming His disciples and inviting them to follow and learn from Him (Matt 4:19; 11:28-30). Jesus gathered His disciples in a learning community that provided experiences that shaped their understanding and faith.

Jesus' method of discipleship involved both personal experiences, when He would tenderly address the heart of a specific disciple (John 20:24-29; 21:15-21), and community experiences, when He would minister to the group of disciples as a whole. It was through these experiential learning experiences that the disciples learned and grew in understanding and relationship. Jesus' experiential learning method included space for personal experience, community, questions, instruction, practice, and discussion. He spent time living with them, teaching them, sending them out, and then He discussed their experiences, helping them process these experiences (Matt 10; Mark 6:7-13; Luke 10:1-24). Jesus's discipleship community encouraged His disciples to ask and to be asked questions, and then to wrestle with and experience the answers (Matt 13:10-17; 16:13-20; 17:10-21; 19:25; 21:20; 24:1-51; Mark 7:17; 8:27-30; 9:28-10:10; Luke 9:18; 11:14; John 21:15-17).

Even with this excellent example, discipleship often looks much different in many churches today. Discipleship frequently takes the form of instruction, relaying facts and truth to be heard and accepted by the disciple. Many times, this resembles the structure illustrated by Parker Palmer's (1998) example seen in Figure 3. Palmer writes of how this method is not ideal because it is "hierarchal and linear." He describes this as top down learning with an "expert," teaching information about an "object" to be received and learned by an "amateur" (p. 103).

In this method, there is little process or dialogue and the emphasis is dissemination of information, with the goal that the "amateur" accept and believe the taught facts and truths. Applying this method to discipleship, disciples are told what to believe or do but

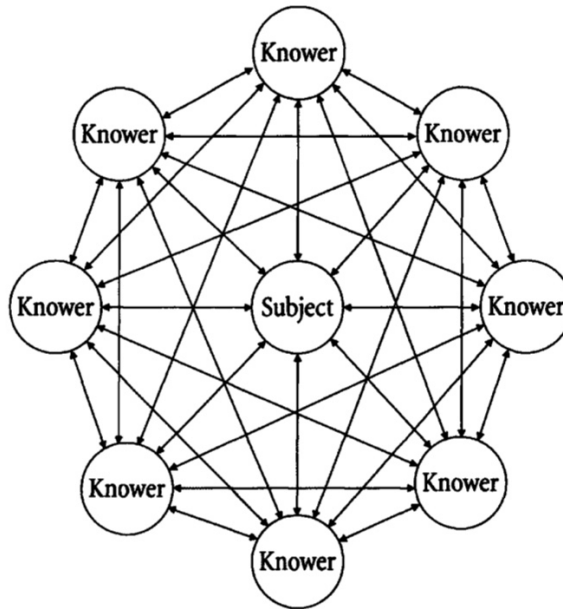


*Figure 3. Palmer's objectivist myth of knowing.*

there is little process, experience, or dialogue. The zig-zag lines in the figure Palmer calls “baffles,” which demonstrates that while information flows from top down, there is not a reciprocal exchange. The learner’s only connection is with the expert, not with other learners or the actual subject. The “amateurs” learn the subject through the direction of the “expert.” The problem with this top-down method is that it creates passive believers rather than active disciples who have on-going experiences with Jesus. Additionally, it does not build connections between other learners in the community (Palmer, 1998, pp. 102-103). Therefore, this method fails to facilitate the primary methods of a disciple’s growth.

In contrast, “the emphasis of experiential learning is that it is the whole person learning rather than just learning in the cognitive domain” (Jarvis, 2008, p. 553). The call of Jesus and His experiential learning method of discipleship is that it involves the whole person in instruction, experience, community, and connection. The experiential learning

method of discipleship looks more like the learning method Palmer (1998, p. 105) illustrates in Figure 4.



*Figure 4. Palmer's community of truth.*

Palmer (1998) says this method of learning takes place when we “allow the subject to occupy the center of our attention.” He explains this arrangement by saying “the connective core of all our relationships is the significant subject itself—not intimacy, not civility, not accountability, not the experts, but the power of the living subject” (p. 105).

In applying this second method to discipleship, Jesus is the subject, the “connective core” around which “knowers” or disciples gather as they experience Jesus, His Word and truth together, learning to live out the truth alongside one another. Hess connects this method to spiritual learning, saying, “Christ’s entry into our lives is what must be kept at the heart of our learning. . . We can put that saving event at the heart of the map, as the ‘great thing’ around which we gather as we seek to know and to learn.”

Hess applies this further, saying that the role of the teacher is to “allow learners to engage the central topic . . . to create an environment in which direct relationship, direct engagement with the subject is possible” (Hess, 2010, p. 284). In this experiential learning model, Jesus is the center, the ultimate teacher, the subject and focus around which disciples gather. The work of teachers, pastors, and church leaders is not to place oneself as the central thing around which others gather, but rather to keep Jesus and His Word as the core subject, and to facilitate opportunities for disciples to directly connect with and experience Jesus and His Word, and to connect with others in discipleship community. In turn, this forms discipleship communities that together learn, contemplate, experience, discuss, and live out the saving work of Jesus in their lives and in the world.

Experiential learning a “life-long process” rather than a focus on immediate outcome (Kolb, 1984, pp. 3-4). While Figure 3 involves the relay of information and initial knowledge and belief, Figure 4 involves an on-going process of learning and experiencing. A temptation for disciples and churches today is to focus on immediate outcomes. Initial decisions and acceptance of beliefs is more measurable than the on-going discipleship processes. This might be why counting decisions for baptism seems more popular than the continual work of discipleship. Discipleship and its continuous work of formation and transformation are processes of a lifetime that involve persistent engagement and nurture. It is through the discipleship process of experiential learning that cerebral knowledge can become heart knowledge and can be firmly implanted in one’s very soul, to be lived out in one’s life and community. If churches wish to disciple people beyond initial belief it is necessary to engage in the on-going work of experiential



learning processes, to facilitate opportunities for people to connect with Jesus and His word both personally and in discipleship communities.

### An Example of Experiential Learning: The Early Seventh-day Adventist Church's Foundation of Small Groups

The Seventh-day Adventist Church has a rich history demonstrating the effectiveness and importance of experiential learning. As the church began, spiritual growth through small group gatherings was essential in experiential learning and faith formation. The roots of small groups within Adventism came through multiple leaders' previous experiences in the Methodist church. Methodist leader Charles Wesley instituted weekly class meetings. He felt strongly that it was only through the accountability of spiritual community that disciples would grow in faith and maturity and so he made attendance at these weekly meetings a condition of membership (Burrill, 1998, p. 143). Wesley understood that discipleship was not a one-time decision but an ongoing process of maturing and growing faith, and was convinced that discipleship happened best in the context of spiritual community. "Thus early Methodism developed all the essentials of relational small groups that met together regularly for mutual support and encouragement and to hold each other accountable for their life in Christ" (p. 147). These relational small groups were an essential discipleship experience that supported the member's growing and maturing faith journey.

With the backdrop of this Methodist model, the early Seventh-day Adventist Church developed weekly social meetings. While early Adventists spent much of their time in personal Bible Study, they recognized that relational and communal aspects of faith formation were equally essential. Burrill writes that while early Adventists were

serious Bible students and often studied to learn biblical truths, “the regular meetings of the church dealt more with the relational than with the cognitive. A knowledge of truth without a sustained experience with God was anathema to early Adventists; therefore, the social meeting was of supreme importance to them.” Burrill (1998) goes on to say that “the truth which they had discovered was validated by a deeper experience with God. It was not just truth for the sake of truth, but truth which led to a deeper relationship with God that they testified to freely in the social meetings” (p. 183). Doctrinal truth was important to early Adventists, but it was not the end goal; rather, relationship with God and sharing God with one another was the essential practice.

Ellen White often wrote of the importance of the small group social meetings. White (1995) explained that people should come together and form “little companies” that meet together and study the word of God (p. 274) and that these “small companies” are essential, especially if the church gathering is large (White, 1948, pp. 21-22). Because the social meetings were smaller, they were more intimate than the church service and allowed time for believers to share in the experience of Christ together through song, prayer, testimony, and encouragement (White, 1995, p. 181). Instructing believers about meeting together, White (1948) wrote, “Pressing together in love and unity, encouraging one another to advance, each gaining courage and strength from the assistance of the others . . . to build one another up in the most holy faith” (pp. 21-22). Ellen White felt so strongly about the absolute importance of the social meetings that she thought it would be better for the church to not have preaching than to not have time together in social meetings. She wrote, “If there were fewer sermons, and more social meetings, we would find a different atmosphere pervade our churches and our camp

meetings” (White, 1987, p. 2:21). It is apparent that she believed these small groups were essential, not only in formation of the disciple but also in transformation of the church as a whole.

While early Adventist social meetings were experiential rather than merely cognitive, the Word of God was at the foundation of these experiences and gatherings. It was experience with Scripture that was of “special interest” in the social meetings and what “encouraged their faith.” It was time spent in the Word of God that resulted in the sharing of personal testimonies (White, 1889, para. 5; White, 1884, para. 7). Scripture was the content and guide in the early Adventist experiential learning community. However, reading Scripture was not just for doctrinal truth or information, but was to be personally lived and shared in community. This experience in the Word of God and in community was formational in the lives of the early Adventist members and the church.

The early Adventist model of social meetings, and how they focused time and attention to personal growth within a community context, is informative to our modern church environment. There remains a need for (a) personal spiritual growth among church membership, (b) the building up of spiritual community, and (c) a practice that allows these two related spaces to inform and strengthen each other. Thus, the model of early Adventist social meetings, the goal of making space for relationship, and the method of experiential learning, were foundational to the development of Scripture reflection groups in the Walla Walla University Church. Having established these foundations, the scriptural content of these groups will now be examined, with special attention focused on specific practices involved.

## The Content: Scripture Reflection Practices

Both Scripture and the surveyed literature demonstrate the significance of the Word of God in a disciple's life. Whitney (1991) writes, "Therefore if we would know God and be Godly, we most know the Word of God intimately" (p. 28). As previously discussed, this knowledge of the Bible exceeds mere cognitive information and involves personal experience with God in His Word. Peterson (2006) writes that when reading Scripture, the believer primarily is "not interested in knowing more, but in becoming more" (p. 59). It is with the goals of becoming more rooted in the Word of God and becoming more like Jesus that this project focused on specific ways one can read and reflect on Scripture for these purposes. The following seven Scripture reflection practices served as the weekly content and practice of the Scripture reflection groups in the Walla Walla University Church. Project participants implemented these practices in personal time alone in Scripture and in community as they shared God's Word with one another.

### **Essential Reflection Practice**

One of the most foundational Scripture reflection practices is to select one verse or a small passage of Scripture and spend time reading, reflecting, and praying through it (A. Walshe, personal communication, 2011). One can choose a particular word or phrase that stands out from the passage, pray and reflect on this, seeking how the Holy Spirit might apply this to one's life. The emphasis is not information about God and Scripture but an experience with God through Scripture (White, 1892, pp. 90-91; Dybdahl, 2008,

pp. 62-64, 67; Tucker, 2007, pp. 153-154).

### **Reflect on the Narratives of Scripture**

The stories in Scripture were given as examples for us and to give us encouragement and hope. In reflecting on a story in Scripture, one can immerse oneself in the narrative, using the imagination to see the story from the perspective of a character in the story or a bystander witnessing the story (A. Walshe, personal communication, 2011). As Johnson (2004) writes, “We place ourselves in the text as a careful observer, as a fly on the wall. If prompted by God, we become one of the characters, seeing the story unfold from that character’s point of view.” She goes on to say, “The aim is to enter the biblical narrative to more fully participate in Jesus’ mind, heart, and work” (p. 111). A goal of narrative reflection is to see familiar stories with new eyes, to meet Jesus personally, and to experience how the Holy Spirit speaks the stories of Scripture into one’s life (Ps 102:18; Rom 15:4; Heb 11, 12:13; White, 1892, p. 87; 1898, pp. 83, 254; Ortberg, 2002, p. 187; Johnson, 2004, pp. 111-112; Tucker, 2007, p. 82; Dybdahl, 2008, p. 65; Foster, 2002, p. 45).

### **Reflect on the Themes of Scripture**

One can also read scripture by reflecting on a certain theme of Scripture such as the love of God, grace, salvation, or forgiveness (White, 1892, pp. 87-88, 91; White, 1988, pp. 5, 238; White, 1903, p. 190). Additionally, one could use this practice to reflect on a particular theological understanding. For example, a Seventh-day Adventist disciple may spend time reflecting on the Sabbath or the Sanctuary or the second coming; however, the intent with this practice is not to prove a point of doctrine from Scripture

but rather to experience it personally, applying it to one's life. Howard (1999) writes on the result of reflection on Scripture's theological themes, saying it "led me not only to answers for theological questions, but also to the beginning of a view of the heart of God, and eventually to life decisions that would shape the course of my journey with God and with others" (pp. 50-51). This reflection practice can be especially helpful for those who have mined Scripture for doctrinal information but not experienced its formational work.

### **Reflecting on a Book of Scripture**

In this reflection practice, one applies basic Scripture reflection principles as they consider a whole book of the Bible. While still reflecting on small passages of Scripture, the entirety of the book is kept in mind. An advantage of slowly reflecting on a book of the Bible is that it gives a more complete picture of the message of that book. Additionally, one may discover deeper understanding as one experiences the themes of the book come alive in their life. With this practice, it is best to start with a small book of the Bible (Tucker, 2007, pp. 152-153), experience the strengths of this exercise, and then progress to the larger books.

### **Reflecting on Prayers in Scripture**

There are many prayers throughout Scripture and these can be models for one's prayer life. In addition to prayers found elsewhere, the Psalms are prayer, song, and poetry, expressing one's heart cry to God. A reader can blend prayers in Scripture with their own prayers, taking the themes and structure of the prayers and applying it to one's own life and circumstances. For example, if a prayer in Scripture is praising God, the reader can pause and praise God; if a prayer in Scripture asks for forgiveness, the reader

can confess and ask for forgiveness; if a prayer in Scripture is requesting God to act, the reader can take time to ask for God to be active in one's life and circumstances (Howard, 1999, pp. 10-13, 33-38; Martin, 1998, p. 85; Wright, 1996; Peterson, 1989; 1 Sam 2:1-11; 1 Chr 4:9-10; Matt 6:9-13; Eph 3:14-21).

### **Reflect on Scripture by Praying Through It, and Claiming Promises of Scripture**

Just as one can pray through prayers given in Scripture, one can reflect and pray through any scriptural passage. This can be particularly meaningful as one prays through promises in Scripture, claiming and applying these to one's life. Miller (2009) gives practical suggestions of ways one can pray through and claim the promises of Scripture, such as the use of prayer cards and journaling (pp. 221-256). Howard (1999) writes that Scripture reveals God's character and priorities and, therefore, an ultimate benefit of praying through Scriptures is that it conforms "our prayers to the character of God" and allows "our prayers to be conformed to God's concerns and our lives to be conformed to our prayers." Scripture, in this practice, is the guide and content of one's prayers (Ps 119:148; 2 Pet 1:3-4; White, 1911, p. 154; 1882, p. 72).

### **Hide Scripture in Your Heart**

Through the pages and stories of Scripture we find that God's people are those who know and live the Word of God. King David said that he hid God's Word in His heart. There are many ways demonstrated in Scripture that one can hide God's Word in one's heart. God's Word can become an integral part of one's daily life as one reflects on Scripture throughout the day, recites Scripture, talks about Scripture, sings Scripture, and memorizes Scripture (Ps 1:2; Deut 11:18-21; 1 Tim 4:13; Ps 119:11; Rev 15:2-3; White,

1894, p. 56; 1888, para. 14; 1892, p. 90; 1905 p. 52; 1952, p. 443). Some hide God's Word in their heart through journaling and other creative expressions such as art and poetry. With all of these, the purpose is to savor God's Word, experience its impact, and to live it out in one's daily life.

### **Implementation of Scripture Reflection Groups**

Scripture, surveyed literature, and personal experience provided the foundation for the formation of the structure and curriculum for the eight-week Scripture reflection groups that were offered in the Walla Walla University Church. There were two pilot groups. The target audience for these groups was anyone who wished to dig deeper in the Word of God, who was looking for new ways to read Scripture, or desired to experience Scripture in community. Participants were recruited via voluntary response to advertisements placed in the church bulletin and contained in spiritual development brochures, which were sent to all members by mail and were also available in the church lobby. Several people joined the groups because of the personal invitation of a friend.

Both groups were held in a home and the group size was limited to 12 members in order to encourage a more intimate atmosphere. The first group consisted of all women. There was one man who initially signed up but when he discovered the rest of the group were all women he decided it was best for him not to attend. Of the 12 women who signed up for this group, three did not continue through all eight weeks for personal family reasons; therefore, the first group had nine consistent group members for the full eight weeks. The second group consisted of four men and six women. Fourteen people initially signed up, however, one person admitted to only signing up because her husband wanted her to attend. After two weeks, she decided not to continue, but her husband



continued to attend. Another person signed up but never attended because of an ailing family member. Another couple who signed up also had some family complications that prevented them from attending after the second week. This left ten members who attended this group for its entirety.

The Scripture reflection groups met for eight weeks. Each week a new reflection practice was introduced, demonstrated, and discussed. A list of the weekly Scripture reflection practices is outlined in Appendix A. The small group meetings were one and a half hours in length, starting at 7 p.m. This time was strictly kept to respect the attendees' time; however, members could stay and fellowship after the meeting officially ended. Members of both pilot groups often stayed to pray and talk together for 30-60 minutes after the official conclusion of the group time.

The small group time was structured as follows (a summary of the group format can be seen in Appendix C). Group time began with an opening discussion question. The purpose of this question was to help people transition from their busy day of activities and engage in the small group time and subject matter (A. Walshe, personal communication, 2013). These questions were usually personal in nature and included such questions as: Tell me about a previously meaningful time in Scripture. Tell me about a time when reading the Bible was difficult. Tell me about a passage of Scripture that is meaningful to you. This initial discussion was followed by a time of prayer together.

After this opening, there was a review of the member's experiences in Scripture the previous week as they applied that week's reflection practice (A. Walshe, personal communication, 2013). Questions were asked such as: Tell me about your time in

Scripture this week. What stood out to you in Scripture? How did this apply to you personally? What did you learn about God? Did you sense God speaking to you in any way? What did you think of this Scripture reflection method? This was the time when members could share with one another specific ways that Scripture spoke into their lives. It was also the time for members to ask questions about the previous week's Scripture reflection practice and to share how they applied it or customized it for their individual situation.

Next, a new Scripture reflection practice was introduced. After a brief time of instruction and discussion on the new reflection practice, the group was given time to personally experience and apply this method with a given passage of Scripture. The group would then reassemble and discuss their experience, with the goal of learning from one another. This time also included an opportunity for questions and clarification about the introduced Scripture reflection practice.

Lastly, the group ended with a time of prayer, with attendees praying in groups of two or three. This gave members the opportunity to connect one-on-one, to share more personally, and to uplift one another in prayer. Group members were also encouraged to pray for that week's prayer partner throughout the following week. As the weeks progressed and a sense of community grew, many prayer partners would stay after the conclusion of the group and continue to talk and pray with one another.

There were several exceptions to this general format of weekly gatherings. The first week included more introductory discussion and explanation of the purpose and format for the group, as well as some time for group members to get acquainted with one another. Members were asked why they signed up for the Scripture reflection group and

what they hoped to get out of the time spent together. Challenges members were facing in reading Scripture was also discussed. Following the introduction of group members and opening discussion, the theological foundation of the group and content was reviewed, and group members were informed that the emphasis for the eight weeks was relationship with the God who communes with His people, communicates through His Word, and works to form His people in the sharing of community. Attention was given to discussing the times in Scripture that God spoke to His people and how God speaks through His Word today. Following the theological foundations of the group, there was conversation on the differences between reading the Bible for information alone and reading the Bible for relationship and transformation. In this first week, the time dedicated to explaining the upcoming week's Scripture reflection practice included more instruction than in later weeks, as it laid out the foundations for the subsequent seven weeks as well, such as the importance of taking small passages of Scripture, even one verse, and reading, praying, and reflecting on it, and waiting for the Holy Spirit to apply it to one's life. Then there was a discussion of possible questions to ask and reflect on while reading Scripture, such as:

1. What does this say about God and His character?
2. What attribute of God do I notice (spend time praising God for this attribute and pray for how you need Him to be this in your life)
3. What words or phrases stand out to me in the passage?
4. What questions or thoughts does this raise in my mind and heart? (spend time praying about this, asking God to speak; spend time listening)
5. What do I sense God is saying to me personally through this passage?

6. What is my response to what I sense God is saying to me through this passage?

As with the following weeks, members were given time to reflect on an assigned passage applying the week's reflection method. At the end of the first group meeting there was a time for prayer with the whole group as anyone willing could pray.

The seventh week of the group was also structured slightly differently. During the time allotted to practice the new Scripture reflection method for the week, reflection stations were set up, such as an art and journaling station, a room where recorded readings of Scripture and Scripture songs were available to play and a quiet room with index cards for memorizing Scripture. Group members could choose a practice of hiding God's Word in their heart and could experience it with others in the group. The group was encouraged to either select their favorite practice or apply all of them throughout the following week.

The Scripture reflection groups concluded on the eighth week with a longer meeting time. The first pilot group decided to share a meal together and the second pilot group shared appetizers and dessert. This last week of both pilot groups included the typical opening question time, prayer, and discussion of the member's experiences in Scripture the previous week. There was also a discussion covering all the previous weeks, as well as conversation about how to continue to apply the Scripture reflection practices following the conclusion of the group.

Approximately six months after the conclusion of the first pilot group, and three months after the conclusion of the second pilot group, members who were willing gathered for focus groups to evaluate their experiences in the small group, the Scripture

reflection material and its impact on their lives. There was discussion about which group elements were most meaningful, the structure of the group, the specific reflection methods that were most meaningful, and how their lives were impacted. Members were given time to make further comments and offer suggestions for improving future groups. The feedback collected during these focus groups will be included in the evaluation discussion in the following chapter.

### **Conclusions and Implications**

There is a need within the Seventh-day Adventist Church for more intentional discipleship of its members. While not the entire answer to the need, this project seeks to provide a resource for on-going faith formation in the church. Both Scripture and the surveyed literature demonstrate that discipleship includes the formational spaces of time alone with God and time in community. Within these spaces, the discipleship method of experiential learning provides opportunities for disciples to personally experience the transformational power of relationship with God and His Word. In discipleship, experiential learning is centered around Jesus as the connective core; it is in experiencing Jesus that disciples grow together, learn from one another, find encouragement, and share their spiritual experiences with one another. For the purposes of this project, experiential learning involves how to read and reflect on Scripture to experience relationship with God. While there are multiple ways to reflect on Scripture, the ways discussed demonstrate various practices that can be applied to reading Scripture to experience the formative power of God's Word both personally and in community. At the heart of the development of these Scripture reflection groups is the desire for people to meet God in His Word, to hear His voice in their lives, to experience a deepening relationship with

Him, and to take part in faith-forming community. While long-term results of the Scripture reflection groups are not measured, it is expected that the possible implications of such groups in local churches would include member retention as disciples experience personal spiritual revival, transformational time in God's Word, personal faith nurture and formation, and a newly discovered or renewed sense of connection with one another.

## CHAPTER 5

### OUTCOMES AND EVALUATION

#### **Introduction**

The gospel of Mark says that as Jesus called the first disciples, “He appointed twelve that they might be with Him” (3:14). To be with Jesus is the primary calling of discipleship. As referenced in Chapter 2, Jesus uses the analogy of branches connected to the vine to explain the relationship He desires with His people (John 15:1-17). Jesus uses the word “remain” 11 times in this passage, emphasizing the importance of an abiding relationship with Him that produces spiritual life and growth.

In developing this project, the call of Jesus to be with Him and remain in His love was central. At the heart of this project was the longing to encourage disciples to answer the call of Jesus to be with Him and grow in relationship with Him. The vision of this project was that participants, planted in the rich soil of spiritual community, would learn to deeply connect with Jesus and remain in Him and His Word. Biblical understanding and literature reviewed demonstrated that intentional discipleship in reading God’s Word in the context of spiritual community is effective and beneficial in helping people to connect with Jesus and abide in His Word. While not exhaustively measured, it is expected that this growing connection with Jesus would lead to life-giving fruit in the experience of the participants.

This chapter seeks to assess the effectiveness and impact of the Scripture reflection groups implemented in the Walla Walla University Church. In doing this, we will examine the spiritual growth process as the measure by which the pilot groups were evaluated. Additionally, the impact of the groups in the lives of the participants, including the pastor facilitator, will be examined and the areas that need further research will be discussed.

### **Project Evaluation Methodology**

#### **The Spiritual Growth Process**

Jesus speaks of the work of discipleship using an analogy of garden growth. As He taught about the gospel garden, Jesus spoke of those who sow seeds and those who reap the harvest (John 4:36-38). In a similar way, Paul writes to the church of Corinth saying, “I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God has been making it grow” (1 Cor 3:6). In his description, Paul included the watering needed to nurture godly growth. Planting, nurturing, and reaping—these are the spiritual growth and discipleship processes that lead to a mature, healthy, thriving faith. When seeking to evaluate the effectiveness of discipleship methods, these aspects of spiritual cultivation must be taken into consideration.

One of the first questions to be asked is: What gospel gardening work is being attempted? The Scripture reflection groups implemented in the Walla Walla University Church were developed to water and nurture the faith of professed disciples and church members. Therefore, in assessing the effectiveness of the Scripture reflection groups, evaluating if and how these groups nurtured spiritual growth is important.



Because the spiritual life is a continual growth process, it is difficult to accurately measure the long-term impact of a specific discipleship method. However, the apostle Paul's instructions to the believers in Colossae outline the important elements in on-going spiritual growth. Paul wrote to the church in Colossae to encourage them in the continued formation of their faith in Jesus Christ, saying, "Just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live in him, rooted, and built up in him, strengthened in the faith as you were taught and overflowing with thankfulness" (Col 2:6-7). Paul's desire that disciples would continue to live in Jesus was the criteria by which the Scripture reflection groups were evaluated: Were members built up in Jesus, strengthened in faith, and increasingly thankful for God and His Word?

Additionally, Jesus summarized the ideals of discipleship as "love the Lord your God with all your heart" and "love your neighbor as yourself" (Mark 12:30-31). Similarly, in John 15, Jesus instructed His disciples to remain in His love while emphasizing, "my command is this: Love each other as I have loved you" (John 15:12). Remaining in Jesus and His love involves remaining in community, extending love to others. It is love for God and love for one another that should define a disciple's life. Consequently, the Scripture reflection groups in the Walla Walla University Church were designed to involve and grow disciples in the two relational spaces of time with God and time in community. As a result, the groups' effectiveness depends on whether or not members grew in these relationships.

### Evaluation Process

Qualitative research was implemented to analyze the outcomes of the Scripture reflection groups. Spiritual impact is best understood through the experience,

perceptions, and evaluation of the participants themselves. To this end, focus groups were conducted approximately three months after the conclusion of the group to better assess the continued impact of the group in the lives of the participants. Focus groups discussed the members' experience with the Scripture reflection material and the importance of the groups' community context. These focus groups were relational in nature, and built upon the trust and confidentiality developed in the pilot groups throughout the eight-week curriculum. This relational research approach was consistent with the relational emphasis of the pilot groups and allowed for the researcher to continue the dialogue that had taken place throughout the eight weeks together, to ask important questions, and to be able to clarify members' answers. This dialogue also allowed for members to characterize the growth that had taken place in their lives, to verbalize the impact of their experience in Scripture, and to affirm the vital importance of spiritual friendships in discipleship community.

Focus group interviews were audio-recorded and then transcribed verbatim. These transcripts were considered raw data: 15 pages for group 1 and 10 pages for group 2. Data analysis began by carefully and critically reading interview transcripts to obtain an overall understanding, then re-reading to identify key sentences or paragraphs from each group participant that represented the opinions and reactions of that participant. Several groupings of responses emerged from this analysis. These groupings were considered emergent because they were not pre-determined; certainly, two categories of group participant reactions aligned with two emphases of this project's implementation, but these categories had not been pre-determined for focus group reaction groupings prior to the focus group interview analysis step. The two primary emergent categories were (a)

the impact of various scripture reflection methods, and (b) the importance of spiritual community. Within these categories other themes emerged, including the impact of prayer in the context of community, the member's desire to share their experience with others, and the impact of the group community on member's sense of community at church. Another notable theme was that many participants found informational approaches to scripture to be ineffectual. Appendix D includes the focus group questions and participant answers.

One pilot group member subsequently led other groups, following this project's implementation as a guide. This author interviewed that member (2.5 pages of raw data), after those groups concluded, to access the member's experience leading other groups and the perceived impact of the groups on the participants.

### **The Draw of Scripture and Community**

The initial focus group questions centered on why members signed up for the Scripture reflection groups. As members shared what attracted them to the groups, two themes emerged: the draw of Scripture and the desire for community. One group member summarized these desires by saying, "For me it is just hard because maybe I didn't know different ways to study or I didn't gain as much just reading by myself." For this member, interest in the Scripture reflection group grew from a longing to know how to read Scripture and experience meaningful connection with others. As members spoke of the draw of Scripture and desire for community a common thread was their desire for something "deeper": a deeper experience in God's Word and a deeper connection in community. We will examine these desires in more detail.

## The Draw of Scripture

Most members of both pilot groups had been Seventh-day Adventist most, if not all their lives, yet many spoke of their desire for a deeper experience in God's Word. While some felt a challenge of reading Scripture was a struggle with time, describing "juggling the urgent versus the important," most spoke of the reading challenge as a lack of satisfaction with superficial Bible study.

One member shared how they were repelled by traditional devotional books that seemed "superficial or perfunctory." Another observed that too often people read books about the Bible rather than reading the Bible for themselves. Most said that they were drawn to these groups because of their desire to better connect with God's Word and for it to come alive in their lives. Many shared a longing to learn a different approach to reading Scripture. One member said, "I have always read Scripture with an idea of doctrines or giving some worship talk, or teaching somebody something else." She went on to express her desire for something more, how she would hear people talk about meeting Jesus in Scripture and she longed that for herself. Another member confessed, "I have read through my Bible probably three times in the New Testament and maybe twice that many, and I don't really know how to study the Bible."

Multiple reasons were given for desiring new ways to approach Scripture; for some, a lack of time in God's Word fed their desire, while others who already spent meaningful time in God's Word were looking for additional methods of reading Scripture. One member explained, "I was looking for tools to find greater depth in what I was already doing." Another said they just needed "something new." In a similar way, someone else shared, "I really wanted to find a way of studying the Bible that really sank

into me.” She wanted something deeper than traditional Bible studies with proof texts instructing members what to believe. For her, those methods did not ‘sink deeper’, and so she desired different tools to experience Scripture more meaningfully.

### The Draw of Community

In addition to Scripture itself, the context of spiritual community was attractive to the members. One member affirmed, “I was hoping to meet other people in the community since I was new to the community, and to make deeper friendships that would also help to inspire my faith, build me up, lift me up.” Another said, “I have been looking for a small group in a big church. . . I was excited to see something that was small, that was intimate, that would create a more small community feel in a big setting.”

One member was a retiree who had been a Seventh-day Adventist most of her life. She had recently lost her husband and while she regularly attended church, she felt lonely and isolated. Before the group first started she spoke of her initial anxiety in joining a small group. She had not previously participated in a small group, and she was intimidated by the prospect of reading and sharing Scripture with others. She sensed that she would be perceived as a Bible novice; however, she realized her need to connect with God’s Word and to connect with others. In the focus group she shared the longings that compelled her to join the group, saying, “I just needed to read with other people, I needed to start reaching out, stepping out of my door and not hiding away.” In her time of loss and life transition, she realized her need for deeper connection in community. While the member’s reasons for desiring community varied, it was clear that most, if not all, joined the pilot groups because of their common desire to connect deeply with others.

## **Impact of the Scripture Reflection Groups in the Lives of Participants**

The two pilot groups had very different dynamics that potentially influenced the experiences of the groups. The first pilot group, while all women, had more age variety than the second group. The first pilot group was better at moving from a primarily cognitive reading approach to a reflective one. Additionally, they quickly connected with one another, and experienced greater vulnerability and shared deeply with one another; however, it is not clear if this was due to the single gender present, the age range, or the personalities of the members.

The second pilot group included diversity of gender and consisted of an older demographic. Many of these members were life-long Seventh-day Adventist and had spent their lives learning to study the Scriptures for information. This seemed to make it more difficult to transition from analytical methods of “studying” Scripture to reflecting on Scripture to experience it. Additionally, conversation and personal sharing was also more difficult and it took longer for members to open up to one another. The second pilot group did not experience the same level of vulnerability or depth of discussion as the first group. However, this second pilot group included several married couples who appreciated sharing Scripture and the group process with each other.

Despite the differences between the two pilot groups, members of both groups found the experience valuable and feedback from the groups had common themes. We will now examine these themes and the impact on the group participants.

### **The Impact of Scripture Reflection Practices**

As previously mentioned, many members joined the pilot groups to deepen their experiences in Scripture and find new ways to read and apply Scripture. One member

expressed that the desire to experience God in His Word had created greater receptivity, “when you come expecting to experience God, then things happen, and I think it kind of creates sacred space for something to happen.” It was in this sacred space that members experienced meaningful time in the Word of God. A member spoke of her involvement with Bible study while growing up in the church. She said, “We would study the Bible which was really the Sabbath School lesson and the goal was to get all the answers in and sort of just feed them back.” She felt that method was not life-giving and, in contrast, the pilot group and Scripture reflection practices were more meaningful. She said, “This was genuine. It was real.” Many members expressed their appreciation of the various space-creating Scripture reflection practices they learned.

While members expressed that various specific practices covered in the eight-week curriculum were meaningful, a common theme was the benefit people experienced from slowing down in their reading of Scripture. One member said, “I realized you can have real worship with just one verse.” Another member described her growing frustration with other methods of Scripture reading that jump from text to text, and how, because of her experience in the group, she now longs to just sit with a verse in Scripture, reading and reflecting on it until she understands it.

A Scripture reflection practice that was particularly meaningful to most members was reflecting on a narrative passage of Scripture, using one’s imagination to enter and experience the passage. One member said narrative reflection was helpful because “I had to engage with it.” Another said it made the stories “come more alive to me and more meaningful.” Narrative reflection was beneficial, helping members enter into the stories, seeing them with new perspectives, and experiencing the stories personally.

Praying through Scripture was significant to many. One member said, “I decided to pray through the Lord’s prayer and I experienced it in a way that I had not before.”

Another member expressed appreciation for praying through the promises of Scripture, saying, “I find myself returning to those promises, and I’m finding new strength in them.” Combining reflection and prayer deepened member’s involvement in the Word as they experienced personalizing the petitions and promises of Scripture.

Several members spoke of the time spent in the group and in Scripture as “watering” and “fertilizing” their faith formation. One member who has a long history of time in God’s Word, spoke of how the experience had revitalized his time in Scripture, saying it was “a reaffirmation for me of some old commitments that had just gotten rusty and tired.” This spiritual watering seemed to continue beyond the eight-week experience in the group. Several members in both focus groups shared how they were continuing to apply the reflection principles and practices in a variety of ways in their time in God’s Word.

A natural result of member’s experiences in the Word of God was their desire to share it with others. One member spoke of the impact of the various Scripture reflection practices in her life, connecting her own personal growth with a longing to share with others. She said she was excited to share the practices “because I thought they were so exciting and in the way it spiritually grew me . . . the fact that I wanted to share with others, it also increased the time I spent in the Word so that was growth for me.” Several members expressed a desire to share the reflection practices with others, and some had already done so. These testimonies demonstrate that experiencing God and His Word naturally results in a longing to share it with others. As an example, a member of the first



pilot subsequently led other groups through the Scripture reflection material; this will be discussed in greater detail later in this chapter.

Regardless of the varying spiritual stages, or previous experiences in Scripture, it was evident that members found the time learning and applying Scripture reflection practices to be beneficial. For some, this time was faith formational; for some, it nurtured their on-going relationship with Jesus; and for some, it reaffirmed their commitment to and love of God's Word.

### The Impact of the Community Experience

As noted, one of the primary reasons people joined the pilot group was to connect with others in spiritual community. It was clear from the focus groups that this need was met and was one of the most important factors in the groups' experience. One member said, "I think community is really important in all of this." Many spoke of their appreciation for getting to know other church members and how this impacted their continued experience at church each Sabbath. One member spoke of the importance of "getting to know people outside of the church foyer." Another said, "I have connections I didn't have previously." Yet another said, "Church is less anonymous to me." One member spoke passionately about this dissolution of anonymity. She shared how meaningful it was to, as a result of the fellowship of the small group, look around church and think, "I know that face. I know that person, and not just say I have seen them around but that we have shared and prayed together."

Just as the Scripture reflection practices were said to have created space to experience God through Scripture, one member referred to the time in community saying, "It has created a sort of sacred space." Members spoke of the depth of connection that

they would not have had without the sacred space of community and emphasized the significance of the deep connection with others that developed and allowed for vulnerability in sharing. One member affirmed that “it connected me with other people and I probably had the opportunity to be more vulnerable than I tend to be.” Another member described the group as “a circle of reciprocal vulnerability and trust.” Several members talked about how a small group setting enabled them to speak up and share more freely. One person contrasted it to their experience in the large Sabbath School classes where sharing or connecting with others can be intimidating.

Members expressed how they learned from one another in this sacred place of vulnerability, where trust and listening to others led to, as one member said, “sharing ideas, seeing new perspectives on something.” A member spoke of the significance of discovering commonalities with one another, saying, “no matter age, career, or pathway, we all struggle with the same things.” One man expressed how meaningful it was to hear his wife, who was typically quiet, open up and share her insights and experiences in Scripture with the group. Another member said that hearing people’s insights “brought out things that don’t even enter my mind. . . It’s nice to hear them.” A result of the vulnerability was that it created space for people to share their perspectives and experiences, which in turn was beneficial and enlightening for others.

In the focus group discussion, prayer with other pilot group members surfaced as a valuable component for many participants. While both pilot groups expressed appreciation, members of the first pilot group, in particular, felt the significance of this prayer time. The women in this first group connected deeply with one another in prayer, often spontaneously extending their prayer time beyond the end of the group each week.

One member used the phrase “sacred hug” to describe praying with one another. As she elaborated about a particularly meaningful prayer experience with another member of the group, she said, “I just felt like I had been transported to a sacred place.”

It is a significant result that group participants described prayer together as “sacred space,” the same description used to describe their experience connecting deeply with Scripture and in community. From people’s responses in the focus groups, it is apparent that the sacred space of small group community was not only important but integral to the impact of the learning experience. Not only did members grow deeper in their relationship with God, but they grew in their connection with one another. It seems evident that participants developed friendships that will far outlast the eight-week pilot group, and will potentially be part of their on-going spiritual growth.

#### Impact of Group Process and Structure

Appreciation for other aspects of the eight-week experience also emerged during the focus group discussions. Several members expressed appreciation for the reflection material and weekly handouts, and how the material was flexible enough for them to apply it in their lives and follow the direction of the Holy Spirit. Others appreciated the structure of the group time, the commitment to discussion and time provided to personally apply and experience the reflection practices. One member expressed gratitude for the leadership of the group, which facilitated an environment of conversation and connection.

Based on focus group feedback, group members observed meaningful results in their own lives from their participation in the pilot groups. It was evident that the goals for the groups, as adapted from those expressed by Paul to the believers in Colossae (Col

2:6-7), were realized. Group members felt significant benefit to their own spiritual growth by learning the Scripture reflection practices, and doing so in the context of a small group community. Interestingly, group members realized additional benefits beyond the stated goals of the pilot groups. This is not entirely surprising, and likely is due to the combination of specific aspects of the group, including a commitment to prayer, discussion, and trusting community.

### **Continued and Ongoing Implementation of Scripture Reflection Groups**

While this project did not include specific plans to continue the groups or to create new groups after the pilot groups concluded, a participant in the first group, Kandyce, used the Scripture reflection material to lead additional groups. Kandyce works at Walla Walla University to mentor new female students, and she desired to offer a small group to her mentees that would encourage them to spend time in Scripture and grow in their relationships with God. The group had five young women and they met for an hour each week for seven weeks. Speaking of the impact of the group, Kandyce said that they were “eager to be immersed in Bible study. . . Girls began to become attached to the Word, they became regular readers and studiers. It was amazing to see!” Kandyce noted, “I believe one of the girls directly made the decision to be a student missionary” because of the time in God’s word during the Scripture reflection group.

Subsequently, Kandyce led another Scripture reflection group with three married couples, meeting for an hour and a half each week for seven weeks. These participants had been Seventh-day Adventists most of their lives and had more experience reading Scripture than the first group. Kandyce observed that although the members had life-long

experience reading Scripture, “some of the adults had never experienced reading the Bible in a different way. . .It was exciting to see them look at things with a fresh perspective.”

Kandyce identified several significant elements in both groups. She noted, multiple times, the importance of the “sharing time” together as participants would discuss their experiences in the Word of God, and the impact of prayer time together. Similar to the pilot groups, the themes of experiencing Scripture and sharing in community were equally formational for participants.

Speaking of her experience leading the groups, Kandyce found the curriculum accessible and easy to use. She noted that she felt confident leading because she had previously experienced the material herself, saying, “I think it is essential to have someone who has gone through the study before hosting it.” Further, Kandyce found that leading the Scripture reflection groups had a positive impact on her continued experience in the Word: “Every time I did the study I found myself discovering new things. It goes to show that the Word is living.”

Kandyce plans to lead another group for college women during winter 2016-2017. This pastor also plans to implement this material at Summit Norwest Ministries, a Seventh-day Adventist Church in Post Falls, Idaho; these plans include a small group, as well as implementing this material in a spiritual retreat format.

## **Impact of This Process in the Life of the Pastor<sup>1</sup>**

I have journeyed through this Doctor of Ministry process while facing some of my life's biggest changes and challenges, both overwhelmingly painful and abundantly joyful. God has worked powerfully and transformationally in my life through this program's process and project. In the foreknowledge of all that would take place in my life, God chose to draw closer to me and call me into a deeper relationship with Him through the Doctor of Ministry journey. The following are just a few of the ways this program and project has impacted me personally.

*Learning to appreciate the process.* As I began the Doctor of Ministry program, I aimed to meet program expectations and fulfill requirements, execute a seamless project and meet my goals in a timely manner. Yet it was God's purposes that were ultimately accomplished. I was initially frustrated with the program because it was more experiential and process oriented rather than cognitive and informational focused. I am naturally inclined towards formulaic approaches to life. I appreciate a formula to solve, a map to follow, a blueprint to construct. Before experiencing the process of this program, I was drawn to formulaic books with titles like, *Seven Ways to a More Meaningful Life* or *Ten Habits of Success*. These simplistic methods to solve complex problems can be attractive. However, when sudden, disruptive and heartbreaking events changed my life, I quickly learned that such formulae do not suffice in the messy and complex journey of life. Thus, I began to appreciate the process of the Doctor of Ministry program, and its emphasis on the formational process that was being worked through in my life. I

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<sup>1</sup>Note: For the purposes of this section, the first-person voice will be utilized.

ultimately realized that what was most significant was submission to the on-going work of Jesus in my life, rather than mastery of information. My focus shifted from product to process. I began to see that the transformation God was working in my life did not revolve around a well-executed project but a well-lived life in connection with Jesus.

My growing appreciation for process has also influenced how I approached this project implementation. My focus shifted from presenting information and calculating results to emphasizing the on-going transformational process of abiding in Jesus and His Word. I became more concerned with member's internal experience and process. Information became less important and dialogue became vital; I spent less time instructing and more time listening and praying. I believe this positively affected my experience, as well as that of the participants, and resulted in a more impactful process for all.

*Learning to appreciate community.* Early on in the Doctor of Ministry process, I felt anxiety as we were broken up into learning groups with whom we would journey throughout the program. I realized that the program was intent on discipleship, and discipleship involves community; and while I agreed with this intellectually, I dreaded it personally. Self-determination, resolve, and my introverted independence have often been isolating, as my attempts at self-protection and self-reliance has provided an illusion of strength. However, what I have encountered profoundly in this process is my own weaknesses and inabilities, my utter loneliness, and my need for connection and the support of spiritual community. Again, it was when my personal life came crashing down around me, when my life began to quickly and radically change, that I came to the end of my own strength, and found a great need for the uplifting strength of others. The

community and deep friendships I developed with my fellow students, and in particular with my learning group, have been transformational in my life. Because of this community, I also began to embrace the support of my local church community. It was in the connection with spiritual community in the learning group and in my local church that I experienced the powerful presence of Jesus through His disciples, felt His comfort and embrace in the arms of those around me, heard His Word spoken into my life through the human voices around me, and received God's strength through the strength I found in supportive spiritual friendships.

Because of the meaningful transformation I experienced in spiritual community, I desire to facilitate such community for others. I implemented the Scripture reflection material in the small group context hoping to provide opportunities for others to experience the formational work of discipleship community. Because of my passion for community, the community aspect and connection of the pilot groups was equally as important as the scriptural material. The experience of sharing and praying with one another was more important than information mastery. This emphasis on community also altered how I viewed my role in the pilot groups. I could not facilitate community if I functioned as the facilitator alone. While my role as facilitator was essential, for community to flourish I discovered I also had to enter the experience as a co-member. I believe this resulted in a richer and deeper group experience for the participants. Additionally, as I benefitted from this dynamic, it reaffirmed my conviction that spiritual growth is most effectively cultivated through discipleship community.

*Facing my own struggles.* In creating curriculum and implementing the pilot groups, I had to face my own obstacles to spiritual growth. As I encouraged others to



spend intentional quiet moments alone with God, I realized my own addiction to noise and relentless busyness. I increasingly noticed my own resistance to time alone in silence and I found that I struggled with disconnecting from distractions in order to connect with God. However, I had the growing realization that if I was to effectively lead others to engage deeply in God's Word in these ways, I needed to personally experience these practices myself. Doing so, I have learned that in solitude with God I experience His deeply satisfying companionship; in quietness I hear God's voice spoken through Scripture, into my life; and in pausing to reflect on God's Word I have found enveloping peace. While my struggles with quietness, solitude, and distractions linger, I resolve to continue to address these personal challenges and submit to God's invitation in my life to "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened" (Matt 11:28) so that I can experience the ultimate rest that comes in His abiding presence.

*Imperfect weakness, perfect strength.* The Doctor of Ministry process has uncovered my obsessive need for perfection. At times, my desire for perfection and the realization of my inadequacies have been paralyzing. There were times throughout this process when I felt it was impossible to continue, times I felt disheartened by my own self-criticism. However, it was in the face of much discouragement and weariness that God confirmed to me that His grace was sufficient, that in my weakness His power and strength could be clearly displayed, and that my weakness could be transformed into strength as I depended on God's power through me (2 Cor 12:9-10).

I have rediscovered new strength and fortifying power by leaning on Jesus and remaining in His transformative Word. I no longer view my weaknesses as disqualifiers for the

work of Jesus in my life, but as opportunities for His goodness to be more evidently experienced.

*In love with God's Word again.* I developed this project from a deep love and appreciation of the Bible. God's Word has been formational in my life and I wanted others to experience the transformational power of abiding in Scripture. Yet this project took me even deeper in my experience with God's Word. This project was a voice of accountability calling me back to God's Word time and again, because, to lead people in spending time in Scripture, I had to be communing with God in Scripture myself.

Through all the transitions and challenges I have faced in my life during the course of this program, it was my continual experience in God's Word that gave me strength to wrestle through the darkness. I found in God's Word a stabilizing foundation, comforting reassurance, and pervasive peace. This Doctor of Ministry process has reaffirmed in my life the transformational power of God's presence through Scripture. While my spiritual journey continues, I am more deeply in love with Jesus and His Word than ever. As the psalmist says, I am consumed with a longing for God's Word (Ps 119:20), and in God's Word I find great delight (Ps 119: 24, 47, 174).

### **Further Research and Recommendations**

This project closely examines the implementation and significance of Scripture reflection groups. Other aspects could also be examined, including how best to structure and conduct these groups and the material developed. While this project seeks to demonstrate the need for such groups, and show the potential impact in the lives of participants, further study may be helpful in assessing how to improve ongoing implementation of these groups and the included Scripture reflection practices. The

following are possible areas of further research and experience that could prove beneficial.

#### Context of the Process

Within this project, Scripture reflection practices were taught and applied in a small group context. While Scripture and literature reviewed highlight the importance of discipleship community, the material developed for this project could be utilized in other community contexts. It is also possible to explore the Scripture reflection material through a one-on-one experience applied in a spiritual retreat setting. Moreover, a spiritual retreat could be added to the small group process, at the beginning, the end, or both. Material developed for this project could be utilized in multiple ways, although the intent is for it to be experienced in some form of discipleship community.

The size of the two pilot groups was limited to 12 members and conducted in the facilitator's home. While many pilot group members appreciated the context and size of a small group, further study is needed to determine the ideal size of the community context. If a larger group was expected, it would be possible to hold the meetings in a larger setting to accommodate more members. If a larger group participated, it is anticipated that opportunities for smaller group interactions would allow members to share more intimately. More experience is needed to evaluate the effectiveness of these potential contexts.

### Curriculum Additions and Process Length

Both pilot groups ran for eight weeks and included seven Scripture reflection practices. However, additional practices could be included in the curriculum. For example, while there was only one week allotted to teach and experience basic Scripture reflection principles, more weeks could be added to emphasize these foundational principles and practices. For those who struggle making the transition from reading Scripture for information to reflecting on Scripture for relationship and transformation, additional weeks on the essential principles and practices of Scripture reflection may be valuable. For example, to emphasize the value of slowly digesting small portions of Scripture, a week could be added for members to reflect on a single verse each day, followed by another week for members to reflect on a single verse for the entire week. Other material could be added to the curriculum, such as the practice of reflecting on a specific character in Scripture, the practice of praise in Scripture, and reflecting on a characteristic of God. The last week, in which practices for hiding God's Word in one's heart were discussed, could be divided into multiple weeks, each week implementing only one of these practices.

If additional Scripture reflection methods were included in the curriculum, this would extend the duration of the small group. Both pilot groups for this project met for eight weeks in expectation that it was a reasonable schedule people could commit to. However, several members expressed a desire to continue longer. One said, "I'd say it was too short, I thought we were just going good." Another suggested extending the group by at least three or four weeks. Yet another wished it would extend for a whole quarter. It would be helpful to determine if adding additional reflection practices and

lengthening the overall process would be beneficial or if this would potentially discourage involvement.

### Sequence of Scripture Reflection Practices

While both pilot groups included the same weekly order of Scripture reflection practices, it could be valuable to amend the sequence of lessons. After implementing the two pilot groups, I concluded that the practices of hiding God's Word in one's heart would be better presented earlier in the curriculum. This way, members would then be able to apply these practices throughout the following weeks and combine them with other Scripture reflection practices. Furthermore, practices such as reflecting on a theological theme or book of the Bible could be discussed after members had more time to learn the fundamentals of Scripture reflection. While research has yet to confirm the benefits of these changes, initial observation suggests that this would be a valuable adjustment.

### Continuation and Growth of Scripture Reflection Groups

The two pilot groups were conducted with the expectation that additional groups would be led by members who were mentored to lead groups themselves. However, shortly after conducting these groups, this author moved from the ministry context in which these groups were implemented. While, as discussed previously, one member went on to lead two other Scripture reflection groups, there was not an opportunity to implement a process that would intentionally mentor leaders and grow additional groups. However, several pilot members expressed a willingness to lead new groups. One member offered her home. Another said, "I think that the materials that you gave us

would be sufficient for me to feel comfortable co-leading something to help others. . .I would be willing to help share that and pass it on.” Given the nature of group development, it seems probable that previous group members could be encouraged and trained to lead their own Scripture reflection groups. Further experience is needed to determine how best to mentor such leaders.

Other than the focus groups, there was no process provided for members to continue their involvement in a small group. Members expressed a desire for either a longer process or additional experiences. One member said “I was just sorry that it ended.” Another suggested “that at the end of these eight weeks, we could have some follow up activities, and could meet maybe in three months to see what we’ve done with them.” While the pilot groups concluded after eight weeks, further study is needed to determine the most effective means of follow-up with group members as they continue to apply the Scripture reflection practices or processes. Additionally, it could be valuable to develop a process for members to continue their experience in another group.

### Group Diversity

While the first pilot group was more diverse in age than the second, neither group included significant age diversity. Therefore, it could be valuable to know the impact of these groups with younger generations. Kandyce’s experience, leading a group of college women through the Scripture reflection material developed, would suggest that these groups would be spiritually impactful on a wide range of age groups, and could be particularly formative on young spiritual lives. More study is also needed to evaluate the impact of these groups on the lives of those in different stages of their spiritual journey, such as those who are studying for baptism, new members, or unchurched seekers.

The first pilot group consisted of all women. Members of this group appreciated this quality, and as one member said, “I loved that it was ladies, just ladies.” However, some members of the second, gender-diverse pilot group expressed appreciation for the mix of men and women, and married couples appreciated their experience sharing Scripture together. This author observed that while there was more breadth of conversation and experience in the Word in the mixed gender group, a greater depth of conversation and closer connection between members occurred in the women’s pilot group. It follows that there is a need for both types of groups. Therefore, it could be valuable to examine the benefits or challenges of an all-male Scripture reflection group, as this has yet to be observed.

### **Conclusions**

This project began by discussing the theological understanding of a God who longs for relationship, and who pursues transformative relationship with His people through communion, communication, and community. The call of discipleship is a call to abiding relationship with Jesus. With this relational emphasis, the intent of reading Scripture is not to master it, but to experience it; not to merely believe its words, but to allow the Holy Spirit to imprint them on the heart. It follows that, because God and Scripture are relational and communal, it is essential in discipleship practice to share God’s Word together in supportive, spiritual community.

While this study emphasized the life-giving importance of God’s Word, it also highlighted a crucial lack within current discipleship: a longing within many hearts to have deeper and more meaningful experiences in Scripture. Disciples’ confessed lack of understanding of how to read Scripture in relevant and formative ways points to a larger

deficiency within the Seventh-day Adventist Church to disciple members in this practice. It seems that, in making disciples, the church has often emphasized belief about God while neglecting the on-going nurture of relationship with God. Consequently, there is a need in the church for resources to disciple people in formative spiritual practices that nurture on-going relationship with God.

This project also demonstrates the great need people share for human relationship, supportive spiritual friendships, and deep connection with one another. Many members, especially those in larger congregations, can feel isolated and anonymous in the weekly church gathering. Disciples need community to encourage them when they are discouraged, confirm God's voice, show them God's tangible presence in the embrace of another, hold them accountable to remain faithful to God, and support them in a deepening relationship with God. There is a need in the church for intentional methods of including people in beneficial spiritual community, to facilitate deeper spiritual experiences and shared spiritual growth.

This project was created and implemented to address the need for more resources that would help the church intentionally disciple members in relationship with God and His Word. It was realized that this is best done within small discipleship groups; therefore, experiential learning in spiritual community was central to this implementation. Evaluation of these groups demonstrated that the curriculum and small group experience had a meaningful impact on group participants. The pilot groups fulfilled the goal of helping disciples to live rooted and strengthened in relationship with Jesus (Col 2:6-7). Group participants observed that the interdependent "sacred spaces" of time in Scripture with God and shared time in Scripture with other disciples produced



meaningful growth in their personal spiritual lives and provided much needed support and nurturing spiritual community. It was found that teaching people to reflect on Scripture with the intent of hearing God's voice and growing in relationship with Him leads to deepening faith formation. Connecting disciples with one another in supportive spiritual community encourages connections that will in turn yield further personal growth among the community's members.

While the long-term impact of the Scripture reflection groups in the lives of the members cannot be measured, and there is still more to learn, it is expected that what the members experienced in the groups will continue to develop as the spiritual seeds sown are watered and grown by the Holy Spirit. Furthermore, it is expected that the relationships developed in the groups will continue to be a positive part of members' church experience. Some growth and continued community has already been realized as one member of the pilot groups went on to lead additional groups.

Ideally this project would contribute a valuable discipleship resource for the Seventh-day Adventist Church to teach members how to abide in God's Word. Although this study was conducted in the Walla Walla University Church, the Scripture reflection material developed could be utilized in other congregations. It is hoped that this curriculum could be further refined for future implementation in a variety of discipleship contexts so that disciples could experience a growing relationship with God and His Word, sharing this with others in a faith-forming community (Col 3:16).

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*I pray, that out of his glorious riches, he may strengthen you with all power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the saints, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know*

*this love that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God. (Eph 3:18-19)*

## APPENDIX A

### WAYS IN WHICH GOD COMMUNICATES

God communicates with His people in many different ways. The various ways in which God speaks demonstrates God's great desire to communicate, to be heard and understood, and ultimately to be in relationship with His people. All of the ways in which God speaks with His people are found in the pages of Scripture. The following is a sampling of some of the ways in which God communicates with His people:

1. Dreams and visions. (Gen 15:1; 28:10-17; 37:1-11; 1 Sam 3; Dan 2, 4; Joel 2:28; Matt 1:20-21; 2:12-13; Acts 10:9-18, 16:9-10; 2 Cor 12:1-6)
2. Angels. (Gen 16:1-16; Judg 2:1-5, 6:1-22; 2 Kgs 1:3, 15; Zech 1:7-17; Luke 1:26-38, 2:8-14; Acts 8:26).
3. Nature. (Ps 19:1-6; Rom 1:19-20) (White, 1892, p. 9-10, 85)
4. Providential workings and signs. (Esther; Gen 9:8-17; Judg 6:36-40; Matt 2:1-12) (White, 1892, p. 87)
5. Directly with people with an audible voice. (Exod 33:11; 1 Kgs 19:12; Isa 30:21; Acts 9:4-5)
6. Prophets. (Num 12:6; Amos 3:7; Joel 2:28; Heb 1:1; 2 Pet 1:20-21)
7. Jesus as the Word of God. (John 1:1-4,14; 10:27-30; 17:6; Luke 4:18) (White, 1892, pp. 11-12)
8. Inner voice of the Holy Spirit. (Acts 11:12, 13:2, 16:6-7; 1 Cor 2:14; 2 Cor 3:2-3) (White, ST June 26, 1901, para. 9) (White, ST June 25, 1902, para. 7)
9. The Bible as the Word of God. (Ps 119:105; 1 Thess 2:13; 2 Tim 3:16-17; 2 Pet 1:20-21; Heb 4:12) (White, 1892, pp. 89-91)

APPENDIX B

CLARIFICATION ON THE DEFINITION OF

CHRISTIAN MEDITATION

In the discussion of biblical reflection and mediation, it might be helpful to address the confusion that surrounds these words and practices. Christian authors note that the term “meditation” has caused concern to some Christians because when they hear the word “meditation” they associate it with Eastern religious practice (Whitney, 1991, pp. 47-48; Johnson, 2004, p. 31; Dybdahl, 2008, p. 61). However biblical mediation is a thoroughly biblical practice, “meditation is both commanded by God and modeled by the Godly in Scripture” (Whitney, p. 47). There are two Hebrew words used in Scripture used for meditation. Combine, these words are used approximately 58 times. The possible meanings of these words include: “listening to God’s word, reflecting on God’s works, rehearsing God’s deeds, ruminating on God’s law, and more.” Additionally, all of these definitions also imply that meditating on God’s Word and experiencing Him results in transformation of character and actions (Foster, 1998, p. 15). Biblical meditation is the practice of listening, reflecting, pondering, of reading it and rereading it, of ruminating and reciting. It is the practice of making Scripture the subject of one’s thoughts and attention, and the occupation of one’s focus.

It might also be helpful for Seventh-day Adventists to note the teachings of meditation on the writing of Ellen White. Not only is biblical mediation and biblical principle, it has roots in the Seventh-day Adventist faith as well. A search of Ellen White’s writings demonstrate that White used the words meditation, meditate and

meditating over a thousand times (<http://www.whiteestate.org/search/search.asp>). She wrote of its importance, practice, and benefits in the lives of disciples. “Those who...devote some time every day to meditation and prayer and to the study of the Scriptures will be connected with heaven and will have a saving, transforming influence upon those around them” (White, *Testimonies for the Church*, 1889, 5:112). She goes on to say that not only will meditation through prayer and Scripture reading positively influence those around them but it will also transform the character of those who practice it, “they will become refined, elevated, ennobled by this intimate acquaintance with God. Such is the privilege of true Christians.” Here meditation is not an eastern religious practice but thoroughly biblical and the privileged practice of devoted Christians.

While both Christianity and eastern religions use the word meditate, biblical mediation differs greatly from eastern religious practices of mediation. Jan Johnson points out that the main difference between the two is their respective goals. While eastern meditation seeks to come to “a place of nothingness,” Christian meditation is about coming into a place of fullness in the presence of Jesus (Johnson, 2004, p. 31). Donald Whitney points out that while eastern mediation is about emptying your mind, Christian meditation is about “filling your mind with God and truth” (Whitney, 1991, p. 47). Authors such as Dybdahl, Johnson, and Whitney implore Christians not to neglect the practice of biblical meditation because other religions use the term. As a stark comparison to illustrate this further, Johnson points out that Christians should not and would not stop quoting Jesus just because some leaders of other religions have quoted Him (2004, p. 33). Additionally, Christians would not stop using the cross as meaningful symbol simply because a cult might use that symbol for other reasons (Whitney, 1991,

p. 47). Therefore, it begs to reason that one would not forego using a thoroughly biblical word or practice, such as meditation, just because another religion uses the same word or practice in a different way. The biblical practice of Scripture meditation is vastly different from the eastern practice of meditation, and eastern religion's use of the word should not keep Christians from experiencing and practicing it for the purpose of meeting God in Scripture for relationship with Him.

APPENDIX C

GROUP THEMES AND FORMAT

**Scripture Reflection Themes**

<b>Session</b>	<b>Theme</b>
Week 1	Principles of reading Scripture for relationship – taking time to slowly read small passages of Scripture, reflecting, listening, praying.
Week 2	Reflecting on narrative passages of Scripture – putting yourself in the story.
Week 3	Reflecting on theological themes of Scripture.
Week 4	Reflecting on a book of the Bible.
Week 5	Reflecting on and praying a prayer in the Bible.
Week 6	Reflecting on and praying a promise or passage of Scripture.
Week 7	Reflecting on Scripture to hide God’s Word in your heart; this includes such practices as memorizing, singing and reciting Scripture, journaling, and artistic expressions.
Week 8	Discussion of the previous week’s focus and a review and discussion of all previous Scripture reading methods.

### Weekly Group Format

Time	Experience
10 min	Opening prayer and introductory discussion
20 min	Discussion of the previous week's Scripture reflection method
10 min	Introduction of the new Scripture reflection method for the week.
15 min	Personal time to engage with and experience the new reflection method
15 min	Discussion of this method and member's initial impressions, thoughts, and questions
20 min	Time of prayer together



## APPENDIX D

### FOCUS GROUPS

#### **Focus Group Questions:**

1. Why did you choose to participate in this small group on reflective Scripture reading?
2. Have you ever struggled in spending time in Scripture, if so how?
3. How has this small group on reflective Scripture reading helped your personal relationship with God to grow? If so, how?
4. How has this small group process, teaching and experiencing reflective Scripture reading impacted your life?
5. What are the methods for Scripture reflection that are the most meaningful to you and why?
6. Have you found that reflecting on Scripture has changed you, impacted you in any way? If so, how? Can you give an example?
7. Was teaching and experiencing Scripture reflection in the context of a small group a good way to learn this? If so, why? If not, why?
8. What was most meaningful to you or most enriched your life in being apart of this small group, reflecting on Scripture? Why?
9. What should your leader do differently in the future in how she teaches about reflecting on Scripture, or how the small group is conducted?
10. Is there anything other thoughts or comments suggestions?

## Focus Group 1

**Emily:** So why did you join the small group?

**Member:** I am new to town, or was newer to town when we did it, and so I joined for two reasons. I had done a small group at my previous home and found it very spiritually uplifting and interesting, and um inspiring and so I was hopeful that this, the content would do the same in this small group and also I was hoping to meet other people in the community since I was new to the community, and um be able to make some deeper friendships that would also help to inspire my faith, build me up, lift me up.

**Member:** I have been looking for a small group um in a big church, we didn't have a lot of options for that, and so when it was posted in the bulletin, I was very excited to see something that was small, that was intimate that would create a more small community feel in a big setting).

**Emily:** So community? (many people mhm in agreement).

**Member:** I think for me, um, I have always read Scripture with an idea of doctrines or giving some worship talk or teaching somebody something, or I have actually done seminars and so forth, and that has actually been useful and helpful for me in the past but I'd always thought there has to be a difference between asserting some sort of philosophy and relating with someone, and I had always heard of people talk about meeting Jesus in Scripture as this person that they loved and not just, "I found a pathway to life that is helpful and makes me feel good," and we actually had a conversation shortly before this group started and um, Emily here invited me to come, and I am the sort of person who if you invite me to something unless it sounds absolutely scary and horrible I will probably come. (laughing of everyone. Emily says good to know). And so I said well let me give this a shot and see if gain some of what I am looking for in this experience.

**Emily:** Anybody else?

**Member:** Well I think, initial response was, I want to do this to support Emily. Just love her and I really wanted to find a way of studying the Bible that really sank into me, not so much, um not the little leaflet ones with the 6 pages – read this this day and here's how it backs it up and those are all fine and good, but not necessarily something that sinks deeper and teaches me how to figure this out in a different way, and those things didn't relate to me quite as well but I found myself loving just listening to the Scripture being read I find myself on my walks taking apart hymns I am listening to and finding special verses that relate to other special verses, and so it gave me some different tools to implement.

**Emily:**

Wonderful. Anybody else?

**Member:** I was attracted by the ad; the notice in the bulletin that described it as a Bible study, an actual Bible study as opposed to a book study, and book studies I enjoy but I really love studying the Bible so that was a great opportunity to do that with nice ladies.

**Member:** I have to second that, (people mm in agreement). I was very intrigued with the Bible study part of it.

**Member:** Well I was looking for tools to find greater depth in what I was already doing.

**Emily:** Next question, I would like to know what you see as challenges in spending time in Scripture. I have been reading some statistics that talk about the percentage of time that

Americans spend in Scripture and the percentage of time Christians spend in Scripture and it is dauntingly low and I think that there is, if we all looked into our own spiritual journey, times that studying Scripture has been difficult. (members: uh huh in agreement) and so I would like to know why, or what do you see as the reasons why sometimes studying Scripture has been a challenge?

**Member:** For me, I just think it's the devil. I really feel like in the mornings when I want to study, I am tired and I am apathetic, but if I do it, it feels great and so a group like this gives accountability which is not the only reason to do a group like that but at the same time it really helps propel um time in Scripture and I think for me its just been hard because maybe I didn't know different ways to study or I didn't gain as much just reading by myself.

**Member:** I think in our spiritual lives, there's always those ups and downs; peaks and valleys. And um a small group bible study can help to break the monotony, and I know that there are times when I really want to study the Bible alone um but its usual because I have been inspired to research a topic or I have some questions that you know I want to find answers to, and so the small group I think was more of a jump start as well as an accountability for me I think the hard part. I agree the devil is 100% the core of not being excited about reading, studying the Bible but it's the monotony of it, unless you find other ways to do it. And a small group definitely presented that, but it also was what I was looking for to give me some more ideas in my studies.

**Member:** I think for me, um I think one of the biggest parts of my own devotional life has always been prayer, and meditation if you will, because it is in those experiences that I have felt the presence of something beyond myself whereas for me when you open a book and I am reading and Joshua did such and such, and the disciples did such and such, and I'm like, "okay, so how is this connecting me to somebody else?" and that's always been my battle with it, is um meeting a person like even when you text on your phone and so forth there is somebody on the other side that is responding to you, when you read the word. Its just sometimes you have those days when you read something that is tailor made for you and other times it's like I am reading the history of the Israelites wandering around in the desert.

**Member:** And I read it how many times before, and what's the point. (laughter)

**Member:** Yes exactly. That's exactly what I was thinking, I think that's what puts me off sometimes, I think, I already know this, I need something new, and sitting together its very stimulating to hear lots of thoughts (uh huh's), I especially enjoyed the, I don't remember what you called it, but where we imagined the sounds, or we imagined (uh huh) we were one of the people in the crowd, that's very meaningful. I think that might have been called the picture method or something like that.

**Emily:** Yea I think I will ask you a question about that in a little bit, I think I called it narrative. But they give you other names for it such as the picture method, or imagination method or

**Member:** I just think the whole monotony thing like you were saying bring creativity to anything is going to be so helpful and we all have such creative minds, and we come from such different perspectives that small it's small groups really just catapult you into looking at things in a new way.

**Member:** I think too that we all have different learning styles, (uh huh's) so we all have different styles in assimilating what's in Scripture. And what I find sticks with me might

not be like anybody else's but that doesn't mean it's not doable, or its not valid and it just is, it just tickled me at how many different methods you can come up with and how each of us would latch onto us in a different way and maybe it didn't stick that one but something else really did and so it was really an eye opener that it just didn't have to be like anybody else's, because I am an individual and God sees me as an individual. He didn't care.

**Emily:** I thought that was interesting some people liked certain methods and I think that is the next question (uh huh) so it's kind of easy to go there um, and again I didn't say this at the beginning um but I'll ask for suggestions or what could be better, please don't worry about my feelings in any of these (laughter), so be as honest this isn't about patting me or the group on the back, feel free to say I would have liked this or this ... we will get there too just wanted to say this before we get there. So the next question, what Scripture methods that were covered in the small group were the most meaningful to you and why? And so we have kind of touched on that a little bit and I will go through them again, (chuckling) so you remember what we have done, the first week we started with the SOAP method, Scripture, observation, application, and prayer. (uh huh) which many of you were familiar with I started the next group I did, well you guys probably all know about SOAP and they were like what's SOAP, so that shows me we are all different, and we all come with different... and so that was the first week where we talked about general principles. Um but that's a pretty good foundation as we work forward. Narrative, or the picture method where we took a story, or we were a character in a story and we imagined what it would have been like to be in that story, the sights the smells the taking the position of the character. Theological where we talked about that even studying theological themes in Scripture we can do it in a relational reflective way, that its not always about facts, um then we took a whole book of the bible and I think we did Philippians (uh huh), um we talked about praying Scripture and that's when we did , we did 2 weeks on praying Scripture, we did praying the prayers of Scripture, and making them our own, and making them the format for our own prayers and then we did making them a promises of Scripture, and that's the week that we did the note cards,(uh huhs), um then the last week, the seventh week we did, I called it hiding Gods word in your heart and we covered a bunch of ones that you could pick, we did memorizing Scripture we did listening to Scripture, artistic reflection um whether that be painting drawing poetry singing um so artistic reflection. So those were the 7 weeks and what we did. So again I will rephrase the question, what Scripture methods that were covered in the small group were the most meaningful and why?

**Member:** My two favorites, first when I never studied before, the whole book, and like this last quarter where we studied um the minor prophets, it was very exciting for me, (people agree), the only thing that troubled me was they jumped around and put all these other texts in I wanted to focus on my (laughter) verse, read it over and over again in different versions and understand it, without this other extraneous stuff, (uh huh) and I think, "oh other people must have different needs then me cause I don't like it."

**Member:** I agree with you

**Member:** Yes

**Member:** So I've chose, I would look at the theme and so its very helpful for me to study holistically whereas the second favorite was the praise of Scripture, because the people were just pouring their hearts out to God and I am learning to study Scripture well

but I am just a kindergartener when it comes to praying. And I really want to live in the power of Jesus prayer and so those 2 things were the most wonderful.

**Member:** Its interesting for you to say that, while that didn't jump out to me during the week it was just might be last week I have some time and I decided let me pray through the Lord's prayer and I experienced that in a way that I had not before.

**Member:** I chose the same one while we were doing this and I was just reading what I had written (uh huh) was a different way to connect with it (Emily: "You chose the Lord's prayer too?") uh huh. While we were doing the whole week of it. But I loved the promises I find myself returning to those promises. And um finding new strength in them and um there are so many, there is something for all occasions, (uh huh) when you are sad or indifferent, there is something for every moment of every day. (uh huh)

**Member:** I think for me definitely my two favorites was um the memorizing Scripture, because I feel like it is a bullet for your day, (uh huh) you have it on your mind you have that word or that verse, it's just like you can use it (laughter), when you're tempted or impatient or whatever, you have that in the back of your mind it's there and you can repeat it throughout the day and it's something that gives you strength in the things that you need on a daily basis. And then the other one that I loved was the narrative or the picture um choosing a different character, really immersing yourself in the story that was extremely meaningful to me because it brought to life and um I just enjoy studying in that creative way.

**Member:** I really appreciated the narrative as well and then the memorizing you know as I understand it we will spend more and more time reading our bibles understanding our bibles and in prayer at the end of the earth, one of the indications of the nearing the end of time, and so I learned a lot of Scripture as a child cause I was lucky enough to go to a Adventist elementary school and we had a lot of memorization but I haven't done it a lot lately, it was helpful to reenergize me from the monotony of just reading the bible which was some of what I had been doing previous to our small group. And the other one was the narrative um and I just realized it this week I am going through Jeremiah and I found myself thinking in the narrative because mostly going through um chapter 39 or 40 where Nebuchadnezzar finally broke through the wall and they looked for Jeremiah and he looked after them and made sure they were taken care of and it stimulated to me if that had anything to do with Daniel or was that before Daniels time and so I wanted to research it out and um I am not done with that yet, but I realized that is kind of doing the narrative plan in that situation, thinking it through and becoming a part of and it made the book come more alive to me and more meaningful.

**Emily:** Awesome

**Member:** I remember that we took the women that touched Jesus' robe (uh huh) as one of our examples so I went home and I said to Devin, "this is what we did" and he kind of latched onto that and he said, "well what if your this and what if your that," and so he really enjoyed that way as well. And I thought well it touched a cord for him too.

**Emily:** Yeah, awesome.

**Member:** That was also my favorite (the narrative). I like stories, and I think for me that has always been one of the more relational ways to approach Scripture because although I tend towards more theological study um when you are listening to, well I listen to the bible a lot, when you are listening to a story then it makes you think about it in ways that

are not just about the words that they used or some underlying principle but what did this feel like, to be that person in that time in that place.

**Emily:** Awesome. So some of these questions may overlap slightly or you may find yourself giving similar answers, and that's ok, you can answer the same if in a previous comment. What was the most meaningful aspect of the small group to you personally? And why?

**Member:** The prayer time at the end. (others in agreement)

**Emily:** The prayer time at the end?

**Member:** Yeah, super inspirational, (Absolutely,) yes and it was helpful. It was real.

**Member:** It's about getting to know you people (uh huh) definitely

**Member:** Reconnecting with people you already knew but didn't have an understanding of the depth that we now have that we will see each other again. (uh huh) (yes, exactly) we know part of you that wasn't obvious before.

**Member:** Kind of like community (uh huh)( back to that word) because of these meetings (uh huh, mhm)

**Member:** It has created a sort of sacred place (others say "yea, absolutely," mhm in agreement)

**Emily:** I like that, created a sacred place

**Member:** A sacred hug, (yea,) (agreement sounds) you know you just , I felt so blessed if we hadn't done anything but that (mhm's) for me the prayer, Amanda and I prayed together, she prayed for me, I prayed for her, and I have known you since you were a tiny little girl (chuckles) but now we have a different(yea) piece now than we did before and I just felt like I had been transported into a sacred place. It was very touching (mhms) yea,

**Member:** Being able to be vulnerable with each other and learn about each other and study together to me was so meaningful to hear other people's perspectives and where they are at in their spiritual lives, that was very meaningful to me and the prayer time was very meaningful too. (mhm)

**Member:** I think for me, what was really meaningful was the time we actually spent um exploring the word, during our study time, for me that was a good structure, and when you come expecting something like that then I think it opens up possibilities and is a further kind of accountability, but I would also say that prayer time at the end was very meaningful as well. (uh huh)

**Member:** Yea I think the structure that you provided going over the section with us before of the way we were going to study it that week (uh huhs) was very helpful in outlining how to do it, but then I was so impressed and astounded with how each person took it so differently (uh huh's, mhms) and that was really fun to come back each week and say what did everybody else do. (chuckles, mhms, yeas) how did you do that, (mhms) that was really great.

**Emily:** Learning from each other.

**Member:** Yea it was great

**Emily:** Awesome

**Member:** And that's what we can't do when I am at home reading, I can nab my husband and make him listen to me (laughter, mhms) but... We got to talk about what we thought, talking kind of helps me process (mhms) so I really liked that.

**Member:** The sharing of ideas, seeing a new perspective on something. (mhms)

**Member:** You know its structure theme, those kinds of things that create some sort of boundaries and a guide help a person to make progress (mhms) otherwise you are kind of just out there and you may or may not flounder it just depends on maybe the day or the personality or what you are being bombarded with so I found that with that is also something from one of your previous questions, is helpful, in doing a group study from time to time.

**Member:** Oh you know when you come expecting to experience God then things happen, and I think it kind of creates a sacred space for something to happen (mhms)

**Member:** I loved that it was ladies, just ladies. (mhm)

**Member:** Yea

**Member:** I think winter is a better time to do it because you know, I don't know about you others but when I get up in the morning now you have to get outside (laughter) because

**Member:** I have 2 children I know exactly what you mean (laughter)

**Member:** It's too hot and you go outside and that's taking the best time to be with the Lord and then the phone starts ringing, so I thought that winter was a good time to do it. (hmm)

**Member:** Absolutely agree, (mms in agreement)

**Emily:** So the next 2 questions I am going to combine for times sake but um wondering in the course of the small group or because of the small group did you sense spiritual growth? And this could be spiritual growth with you and God, your time with him being strengthened, your devotional time your/connection, your ability to hear him, anything like that. And also spiritual growth is how it affects our relationship with one another too, (mhms) and we talked a little bit about that, but did you sense it changed or impacted your relationships with others or your feelings about church because that's spiritual growth as well, so. And honesty you could say, in all these questions you could say, no, its ok. But did you sense that this time together in a small group and the subject matter did it affect your personal connection with God and your connection with others, church. If yes, then how?

**Member:** I got supper excited about the idea of doing hosting, and sharing the ideas because it thought they were so exciting and in that way it spiritually grew me in the fact that I wanted to share with others and um it also increased the time I spent in the word so that was a growth for me.

**Emily:** Awesome

**Member:** Yea it was a growth for me, it humbled me it helped to pull me back and give credit to awesomeness and the wholeness of God. And remember the course, sometimes you can get off track if you're ... I have started purposefully reading through the bible in chronological order and I have done it a couple years in a row and have also done some daily devotionals from time to time, and those are also helpful in there ways but this was probably the right time in my life for the bible study as you structured it and it grew my spiritual life from the perspective of me and my personality kind of pulling back on the reigns sitting and saying, wow, rather than running ahead, (laughter) which my personality has a tendency to do. It was definitely positive on my front

**Member:** I'll take a risk here and say that I don't think it was a huge growth experience for me spiritually I will say that it connected me to other people and I probably had the

opportunity to be more vulnerable than I tend to be(mhms) which is maybe a good thing, it made the church feel smaller (mhms)

**Emily:** And I would say that's spiritual growth too. (mhms)

**Member:** Yea, mhms in agreement

**Member:** Isn't it interesting you have been a member of this church your whole life and yet the connectivity happened as an adult woman (yea yea, mhms) in a totally different way than it did as a 6-year-old in primary

**Member:** Definitely true

**Member:** Yea, I can look out during first serve, I know that face I know that person (yea, mhms) and not just say I have seen them around but we have shared and prayed together, (yea, mhms)

**Member:** I have connections I didn't have previous either, (yea)

**Member:** It included these people in our spiritual group

**Member:** Yes, which we didn't know before

**Emily:** And I think you said a key word, vulnerability, and you don't often get that sitting in church always. (members mhm in agreement)

**Member:** But sitting in this group we were vulnerable we also trusted and so it went both directions, it made a circle

**Member:** I think you have to have both otherwise it doesn't work (mhms)

**Member:** But you are not always lucky enough to get both, (laughter)

**Member:** That's true, you seem to speak from experience (laughter)

**Emily:** Next question, I am going to push us ahead a little bit and again some of you have already talked about this um but I am going to ask it anyway, was being in a small group an effective way to encourage you and teach you to spend time in Scripture, why or why not. So we have gone from talking a little bit about our group context and our connection with Scripture and now what I am searching for, when it comes to teaching people to reflect on Scripture in a relational way with God is the small group context helpful? Was that a good way to learn it as opposed to other ways, if that makes sense.

**Members:** What other ways are there, (agreement)

**Emily:** Um, sermons, personal one on one bible study maybe, a lecture, seminar, spiritual retreat (chuckles), there are I mean the other ways,

**Member:** Sure

**Emily:** So was it an effective way and some of you have touched on some things so you can repeat them if you want, to teach these things and to encourage you to read Scripture, why or why not?

**Member:** We didn't have to have the group to use these tools. We can use them alone but it was useful in a group so in that way yes it was, because you didn't have to be together to do this

**Member:** But when we came back together every week I grew more from the possibilities of how that way of studying Scripture could be utilized then I would have if I had just heard it in a seminar or a sermon would have outlined it and I would have gone home and applied it on my own, because each one of us had really looked at it slightly different and me not being creative I was especially impressed with the creativity that some of us brought that I wouldn't have gotten if it had been a different kind of format then a small group



**Member:** I would say that I like that its longer then a retreat because it's so easy to go to a retreat and you have this wonderful mountain top experience (mhms) and you come home and think of all the ways you are going to have this time with God and then it sort of fizzles out (chuckles, mhms) and when you are one on one can be helpful, and I know this is often done when you are studying for baptism and it can be a way to really disciple a person or for a person to really be discipled but I think a small group kind of takes the pressure off, and makes things fun. You can laugh and share stories (uh huhs) and in a way that doesn't always happen the same way one on one, I would almost say this is the ideal way to do it.

**Member:** I was just sorry that it ended

**Member:** Yea, me too,

**Member:** I heard that when she needed another group, I was like, Oh

**Member:**

I thought the same thing, how do I get on it (laughter)

**Member:** So, we are going to get our calendars out and start again, (laughter)

**Emily:** Yea, at the end of tonight (chuckles and laughter, agreement). Someone else said, and I don't remember who used this word but I liked it someone said, accountability... Could you tell me about small group and accountability?

**Member:** Small group and accountability I just think that it's there is other people counting on you to come with your ideas and creativity or the idea that people are kind of counting on you, to be vulnerable in the group to be part of a group and share in a group and so going home and when I get down or when I think, "oh, well I don't want to spend time in my word," well I have this thing that I am going to and once you get in there you start saying, this is awesome this is great I love this. I just think that it, like you said there is peace in valleys and when you are in a valley this is a really good way to keep accountability high so that you can get out of the valley.

**Member:** It's true

**Member:** And it was so meaningful, it was genuine. Growing up in a very small Adventist church, and I don't mean to say this is a bad thing it's just a fact I can remember as a teenager having to go to the adult class (mhms) where we would study the bible which was really the Sabbath school lesson and the goal was to get all the answers in and sort of just fed them back, this is not even... this was genuine (it was real) yea, I am not sure exactly how to say what I am trying to say, but...

**Member:** I think that makes sense,

**Member:** Totally, definitely I agree coming from a big church, this was more genuine for me talking about how you were connecting saying, I know that person across the way and I know they are a spiritual person they spend time in the word and we are studying together, and I don't know I just really, really appreciate that, like what you were saying.

**Member:** I would add to that and say that when you are talking about the Sabbath school classes in our church, the average one has 40, 50, 100 people so that's hard to really be a small group you don't really connect with others in that environment the same way. And I don't really feel like speaking up in that environment,

**Member:** Yea

**Member:** Not when there are half a dozen theologians sitting there (laughter)

**Member:** Exactly

**Member:** Well I am not going to get this right (laughter, agreement)

**Member:** You do have a wonderful bond with those people, I belong to the theology Sabbath school, my we are a group, the potlucks the things that happen.

**Member:** And they are a group because people come up to me all the time and want to see Gresham because my husband came to the Sabbath school group many months by himself and people were quite impressed and enthralled so I have met people through that close knit group (mhms, yes, agreement sounds) that I didn't know because I was in the children's Sabbath school

**Member:** That's true

**Member:** So it must be good to have an adult experience too

**Member:** I guess so (chuckles)

**Emily:** I do think though that both are valuable. They are just different.

**Member:** There is something for each personality really (mhms) I think one of the things that tickled me after we had been doing this for a while we would go home with homework (chuckles, mhms) and I had never missed an assignment in my entire life (mhms, laughter) and so I would do my homework (laughter) and the first couple days it was like I have to do my homework ok, and then it was like I get to do my homework (laughter, yea, agreement noises) and so it took on a completely different feel to it

**Member:** And that is kind of the reference to accountability as well, (yes, agreement)

**Member:** I looked forward to it, that's right, I like this

**Member:** I want to do my part

**Member:** That's right (yes, agreement)

**Member:** I have a suggestion, my study group, I have a study group but we always end at graduation of that study group when college starts, I feel a huge vacuum so I have given people assignments that we do as a group in the summer (oh I like that, yea) one of the things is going through the psalms and just reading one psalm a day and personalizing just one verse and writing (oh I love that) about that, and several other things that we cannot leave a void over the summer. (yea, I like that a lot)

**Member:** Yea, can't just put God in a little drawer for those 3 months

**Member:** And Emily that could be something that you suggest in your study

**Emily:** Perfect I love that idea and we are going to get to a question where I ask what all could be included I did try to keep it to 8 weeks, because sometimes if something is advertised for more it almost seems daunting, (overwhelming) rather than saying hey we are going to take a 2-week break and you don't have to but, you will notice that when something is 12 weeks people say, that is 3 months. So (laughter) anyway but other things to be included we will get there in just a second. I want to follow up on I asked if this an effective way, and I think I know the answer to the question, but do you think there is another effective way or a more effective way to teach this material or do you see the small group as the...

**Member:** Well I think there are other ways and we touched on them a little bit in our conversation, but for me personally this was the best way to be introduced to the different ways of study because it fulfilled why I came to the bible study to begin with, to get to know people to have that sense of community when I left as well as to get jumpstarted again with some bible study in a different way.

**Member:** I liked the word jumpstart, because that's what it does for people and it gives you a variety of techniques to apply.

**Member:** What I, besides the accountability piece, I like that but I also like the fact that I think you said at the end of every meeting, “if you need to study something different that’s okay.” I enjoyed the group but if it was scripted every week I would be like agh, I gotta study this, (chuckles, yea) you left it to not always be this, you let it be whatever we needed (I liked that too).

**Emily:** Since the small group time, did anyone else want to say something to that, I don’t want to rush

**Member:** Um, I don’t know that I have a whole lot more to say but as I think about it, I think of what often happens in a one on one experience so I think sometimes you know working in pairs and coming together or things like that can make things (that’s interesting) can make things helpful. Or working in small groups then coming to a large group, I don’t know.

**Emily:** Interesting, I like that idea.

**Member:** To tag onto what Suzann said sometimes I think that during the course of a week things happen in our lives so you are right having the freedom to take it a little bit of a right turn or a left turn, to find something that really takes care of you that week instead of what might have been on the syllabus changed how I studied a couple of times, because what I needed was something different to get me through that week. And it still worked, but it wasn’t exactly what, it wasn’t an exact replication of what everybody else was doing and that’s what makes the Bible so wonderful it speaks to each one of us, in an individual way, for thousands of years.

**Member:** Well and that’s what made it such a fun community to come to each week it didn’t feel like it was so rigid that if I wasn’t here or hadn’t done the same thing that you outline (yea) that I would be the sore thumb sticking out, I felt like it was ok, come anyway. (mhm, yea) and you were really good about making it all inclusive (mhms) and the outside stuff that each one of us did at different points still had relevance (mhm, yes,) so it didn’t get us off on a tangent and make any of us feel, I don’t think, like our time was being wasted (yea) so to speak so,

**Emily:** Awesome. So since the small group, have you applied in your personal time with God any of the things we did in the small group together, have you carried those, after the 8 week was that it or have those carried over into your time with God and if so, what? And Amanda I think you mentioned that you did the Lord’s prayer recently, so that has carried, that’s an example of a carry over.

**Member:** It carried over for me in the small group that I did and then the memorizing Scripture I have really tried to incorporate that to my life, because I tend to forget what I study (mhms in agreement) and so if I can have verse or a word that refers to a verse that I can have throughout my day really is helpful so I have carried that over.

**Member:** And incidentally the book study has been helpful to allow some of the options to be sporadic, that one I have applied with the minor prophets in the Sabbath school lesson because there are a couple outside sources that are podcasts that I have listen to supplement really learning about that book and um having that earlier from our bible study together was awesome

**Emily:** Anybody else, I think you have mentioned singing on your walks (uh huh) and we did talk many weeks, although singing was not one of the formal, we did talk about how singing supplements any of those

**Member:** I think that since then I have had the hymn book besides me during my worships as I read a verse out of it see the hymns and I think singing the hymns at church I am paying much more attention to Scripture, Scripture in the hymns, so that's really it gives me greater joy, as we are sitting there in church "oh that's in Isaiah!" (uh huh)

**Emily:** I know for me someone gave me those Scripture cards, where you pray for someone during the week, someone gave me one where they had prayed for me with verses all around it, and it was meaningful to me, and the one I did for my grandma I sent to to her, and with this whole thing with my grandma I was worried about my mom and how she was dealing with it, and I thought I am going to give her all these things I am praying about, I am just going to write them down for her, so I wrote those down and gave them to her, so I have found that I have done that because it was meaningful to have that given to me, because it was so meaningful so now rather than mom I am praying for you, (yea) so I have done that on multiple occasions. Since then, so that ended up being my favorite and I didn't know it would be. Alright, just a few more questions, there are more sheets in here then I need, don't freak out (laughter). Here's the question I referenced earlier, what else would you have liked to have included in the small group experience or content, because we talked a little bit about the structure, and what we did together and is there anything else to include in the structure of experience of the group and then any other content, and we already mentioned one such as going through the psalms and picking one verse to personalize, so I don't think we did this together but one of the other options that is to take a week of just praise and thanksgiving and I did that in the second one.

**Member:** Going over praise and thanksgiving in the bible?

**Emily:** Uh huh, and a week of just being immersed in praise and thanksgiving

**Member:** We did that in a small group that I did, praise and thanksgiving

**Emily:** So any other thing you would like added to our group, I don't want to take too long, to the content

**Member:** I always love to sing with a group but not everybody likes to sing. (others agree)

**Emily:** To sing together?

**Member:** Yea to sing together because I am not musical and I love to hear it, (laughter)

**Member:** I find in the mornings, I find that is what God puts into my brain to wake me up is a song, (hmm) and so I find if I listen to Christian music those will come, and I write down the song each morning and then that's how I start my worship, if I get out of bed, so I think that songs are just I don't know so important  
(some stuff cut here cause it was hard to hear and contained extra conversation)

**Member:** Music affects you emotionally and it can be positive and very negative depending on the circumstances

**Member:** I think the hardest thing for me is to slow down and get rid of all of those thoughts that are daydreaming other things or thinking other things, so that you can pray so that you can meet with God so that you can be with him, and I find that with music has a way of doing that whether it's an old hymn or a contemporary song

**Member:** I also found that meeting at the same place helped, and same time helped. It was the same group, it was in the same home, so we came in and didn't get any distractions.

**Member:** It needs to be a safe place

**Member:** I liked that we had it outside the church walls because for me that is work, but outside of that I could relax in a different way

**Emily:** I will go with that, that this group didn't feel like work. It was a friendship, spiritual growth, and if I had done it in the church building I wouldn't have had the same experience

**Member:** The sense of community, we were able to get comfortable in a way we wouldn't have. I don't feel the same way on those hard pews or the fellowship hall in those chairs as I do in someone's living room  
(some stuff here too hard to hear)

**Emily:** a priesthood of all believers.

**Member:** There is a priesthood of all believers that right.

**Emily:** These are shorter questions we will go over them quickly. Is there any other suggestion to improve the small group experience or its context?

**Member:** I find the SOAP method to be the most useful, I found that ... (hard to hear what's the rest of what this member said)

**Member:** Well even when we were talking about Philippians, it would've been, you know we find this in my little Sabbath school group. That we're studying Job, and so we remember to put into the study what happens in those times. What they had to deal with, how they lived; those pieces help me understand how they lived and how they responded to those disasters, and the good things, and the... and just understanding them, helped me understand me a little bit better too.

**Emily:** And that's some of best information.

**Member:** Information is exactly what you need sometimes.

**Member:** I think it is good to have a little bit of information stuck in the little different pieces maybe like a little blurb or I don't know. Because I'm not a big historical or informational person so...

**Member:** But like you were saying, when you're studying Jeremiah, and you go into another space and find historical pieces of it that help you understand what was really going on, in the country around it and the other tribes, and so on, then it makes more sense at how they were dealing with their issues.

**Member:** I just overwhelming, I quit after this, there's no way that I would even fathom creating something like that, but then I loved it so much, that I was just like, hey, you've got it all. It was wonderful.

(some things hard to hear)

**Emily:**

Um, so these are more yes or no questions, but you can elaborate on your yeses and no's if you want. Some of these I think I know your answers, but would you join another group like this?

**Members:** (Unanimously) Yes!

**Emily:** Okay, that was unanimous! And okay I think I know the reasons why, because you talked about some of them. Would you recommend this to a friend, or bring a friend with you?

**Member:** Yes!

**Member:** Only if there would still be room for me! (Laughter)

**Emily:** Some of you have said a little bit of this too, but would you be comfortable sharing what you've experienced or learned in this group with others?

**Member:**

Yes, and I have.

**Emily:** You have. And I think that Kandice, you definitely have, and you went home and shared it with Devin, and I loved that. Um, and this question is not because I'm going to follow up and ask you to do this, so I'm prefacing, but would you feel comfortable leading or co-leading a group like this after having been through it, or having materials, and again I'm not going to follow up and ask you to do it.

**Member:** Yeah, I think that the materials that you gave us would be sufficient for me to feel comfortable co-leading something to help others, because it was valuable to me. And that sense of community was a spiritual growth to me, that I would be willing to help share that, and pass it on.

**Member:** I think it was tangible enough, and it was easy enough to... that you could take, anyone could take and share and teach that. I don't think it was too hard, but so... I don't know... But I still, yeah. I wasn't intimidated by taking that and being, "oh I have to teach this now," it was like, "oh this is exciting!" ideas that I can share with others and you know...

**Emily:** Any comments that you would like to add, or anything that you have thought of that you didn't get a chance to share, to add, on the record?

**Member:** Something that just came to me, is that at the end of these 8 weeks, we've could have some follow up activities, and could meet maybe in three months to see what we've done with them.

**Emily:** Oh! That's a good idea!

**Member:** Even if you couldn't redo the ... we could have something that we were each assigned. A book of the bible or something, and each person could come back with three things that really changed their life.

**Emily:** I like that. I think the ideal, my professor that I've worked with, about um, and gleaned some ideas for this group from him, um, what he does is he will run a group for 8 weeks, and then stop for a period of time to allow, you know, there be closure so no one feels stuck in a small group for an endless period of time. And I think he does 2 or 3 weeks and then restarts another one, and you're welcome to rejoin at that time or not, and so that's a way of continuing it. Does that sound like a feasible option? If I were to do this again, would you see that as a possible model?

**Member:** Yeah, I mean for me personally, I just saw recently in the bulletin that there were small group possibilities coming up again, and you know, count me in! So for me, yeah. I think the basic structure for how you ran the two bible studies that I've done with you know, were perfect from the sense of 8 weeks is probably long enough, and you're very good at holding to a set amount of time, and um you know, people want to participate in stuff, but we've got a lot of things going on. But then to have the opportunity after a few weeks to do it again, I think is, it gives people an out if they want it, but for those who want more, because I'm always wanting more, because that's where I'm at. It just gives that opportunity.

**Emily:** Yeah that's why it would be closed for 8 weeks, a break, and then a new group forms, and it could be the same people, but there might be a new one.

**Member:** And there are some drawbacks to a new one, the bond that we had, I would love that to just continue, but that's a little selfish (laughter)

**Member:** I think we have to be careful because then it would look like, “oh look at them” (laughter)

**Member:** I think that’s something that’s useful to me, is to stay in the same book.

**Member:** Saying that, a thought came to my mind, is you gave us 7 different ways to do it, it would be fun to come back and spend 8 weeks doing one of those weeks, and then doing 8 weeks, or break it in half, but anyway do more weeks of the same thing and then another 8 weeks of some of the other ones.

**Emily:** And you guys did two different ideas that I liked very much, because I liked, I thought about yours of incorporating all of those ideas in one book study, like let’s take the book of Philippians, and, the only problem is narrative, but you can only imagine what people were thinking or feeling that might be a way to ... I like both of those very much.

**Member:** I think took, that like at the end of the study, if you have your materials, I know that we had talked about formatting materials, and having that and saying to somebody, do you want to start a small group? The materials are there for you. Here you go, and have the opportunity for someone to go out and do it with more people, and if someone is feeling convicted to do that, then they have to do that.

**Emily:** Well I would love that, because to me the goal is to have a lot more of this in our church, especially in a large church setting it’s really hard to have community. And I’m only person, so I can only do this so many evenings a week, so the more of these we have, the better. So I know, I’d like Kandice to talk about what she did.

**Member:** Well, I was a mentor at the university with freshman girls, and was wanting to do a bible study with them and I did a bible study two years ago with my girls, and we just read through the book of John, and discussed each verse, and prayed, and it was kind of short and then when I entered this group, I kind of thought oh wow this is a really interesting way to study the bible and lots of different creative ideas, and so I think that I asked you if it was okay to use this material to do a bible study with the freshman girls, and we had 5 or 6 freshman girls attend regularly throughout the quarter. I think I did it for 9 weeks, because I added some other things in. It was great, the discussions were great, they were able to be vulnerable, it was just like this, and it created a community amongst our group of girls that we met with, and it brought us to another level in our mentor relationship. They told me that it was a retreat for them, because I didn’t know I thought, well maybe they feel obligated to come because I’m their mentor, and I’m hosting a bible study, when I think I gave people stuff, they said it was such a nice break to come and just be able to study the bible, because they are so busy in school, I mean we’re busy too, but it gave them kind of the same feeling. Accountability, come and relax and talk about the bible. So it was a blessing to me to be able to see that, and hear their ideas, and perspectives, and I loved it.

**Emily:** Do you think you’d lead a group like that again?

**Member:** Yeah, most definitely. I think I’d do it more structured, I had mine formatted, but it wasn’t as structured as yours, I may like the ways yours was structured a little more. So I feel like I need to take yours again, and then do it again.

**Members:** (Laughter)

**Member:** You know, I think that what you had set up could also be very valuable to those... (Can’t hear due to noise.) (Essentially very valuable to community members/university students).

**Member:** Have like a “Christian women of Walla Walla” thing posting it on there, it’s gonna be a 12 or 8 week thing, you know. (Emily: Christian Women of Walla Walla, Yeah, that’s a great idea.) posting it up on Facebook and getting 12 women from the community that are not all.... Sounds refreshing.

**Emily:** Mhmm, yeah. I think that would be really fun, just to have a mixed group.

**Member:** (Something about a meal.) Something about having food together is really special.

**Emily:** Mhmm. Um, anything else that you want to add or are dying to say? Or ask that’s been on your heart? If you think of further comments, suggestions, ideas, feel free to call or email, and we are planning on next quarter’s spiritual development. Um, opportunities and bible studies and small groups, so if you have ideas, or if you want to lead, um please let me know. I have no idea what I am planning on leading this next quarter, but I will lead a small group of some kind, and I’m guessing I will lead a version of something like what we did, but I will tweak it just to try my own curiosity, and do it differently, so, um, so stay posted for that. Though, I will say that one of you said something about it being all women, and I will say, this group was all women, and the next one I did was mixed, and both were wonderful, but there is something really special about it being women. Really is. And um, I enjoyed our time very much. And thank you, I know this was a huge gift that you gave me tonight, taking an hour and a half out of your evening, and your beautiful summer evening no less the cooler part of the day to come and answer questions. So, I’m very, very grateful, and I appreciate it very much. So thank you. That was a huge gift to me, and to my research. I spend this next month hunkering down and doing a bunch of writing. So I kind of needed this information before I did that, so thank you. Thank you.



## Focus Group #2

**July 8, 2013**

**Emily:** Why you chose to join this small group? What attracted you to it? And here, here's some context...I'm curious if you joined this small group because of the subject matter covered, or if you were looking for a small group, or something else.

**Member:** I was attracted to it because it was a topic that I had an interest in. Um, and um, I was just impressed by the efforts that you and the pastoral staff were making at uh, spiritual development, a.k.a. spiritual formation. I don't have any problem saying those words, I know what we mean. And I felt like I just needed to reach out, and get out of my little shell. Situation, which you all are aware of. So, yeah, it was a real, real blessing, attractive...

**Emily:** Anybody else?

**Member:** I like the topic too, uh, I have read through my bible probably 3 times in the New Testament maybe twice that many, and I don't really know how to study the Bible. I read it, but I was hoping for some other ideas on how to approach Bible study, besides starting from beginning and reading through to the end.

**Member:** I also liked the topic, and I also liked hearing other people's comments and how things work for them.

**Member:** Yeah I think it's a growth when you're in a group, and I need and appreciate the fellowship and the learning from that, and I really like this small group thing, and Emily sometime you can use my house if you need to...

**Emily:** I'd love that, (Something about her husband)

**Member:** He suggested it

**Emily:** Wonderful, well then, just because he suggested it too, I should take you up on that

**Member:** Yeah,  
(some other conversation)

**Member:** Well I joined, I decided to do this group because I probably, it was a selfish thing probably on my part, because I just needed to read with other people, I needed to start reaching out, stepping out of my door and not hiding away, um, I'm not a scholar, I'm not a studier, but I felt that it would be good to do a bible study. And I go to Emily, well, I thought, I could probably do this if I go to Emily's house. And so, it was because, and that, and it has helped me start to feel a little bit easier about being with other people...

**Emily:** You are doing better (affirming).

As I look at statistics about how many Christians actually spend time in their bibles, um, it's a dauntingly low statistic often times, so, and I know that in my own spiritual life, there are times when reading the bible is challenging; um, spending consistent time in it is challenging. So, um, what do you see as the reasons why at times, we don't spend more time in Scripture, or studying it is a challenge?

**Member:**

For me, it's always juggling the urgent versus the important. And I often do the urgent more than the important. That's my struggle. I say, "I don't have time for that important

thing, I have to get this done first, then I'll set aside time for the important thing" and many times the important thing doesn't come.

**Member:** Well I... (can't hear the recording)

**Emily:** Anybody else? Challenges?

**Member:** Well I've always been, uh, what's the right word, repelled? Put off by morning watch books. That's just me, and I don't wanna blame anybody if that's something that you're into, but it has just, it has always had this air of superficiality, (Other Member: Milk Toast) Milk Toast, yeah. It's perfunctory. And I didn't want bible study, or the reading of Scripture to just be well read a chapter, close the book and get on with the day, you know? You need some time to mull things. So the approaches that you were showing us were very, very helpful. That you could spend thoughtful time on a verse, or a chapter, or even trying to read a whole little book, you know? Um, those different approaches are very valuable to me. Um, there've been a few of these devotional books that have actually been very lovely. Uh, I'm rereading one that my wife and I read together several years ago, by Bill Johnston, former editor of the review, put out a book that he called Jesus, it was all about grace, all the way through. And we thoroughly enjoyed reading that together. And it wasn't, it didn't feel perfunctory, perhaps it was because of the topics that he was using, and the illustrations, and his writing style and so on, whatever, but what I find I'm doing is sitting down at the beginning of the week and catching up for several days to the current date. So you know what I did? I wasn't reading on a daily basis, but okay, I don't care. At least I'm trying to connect. So, uh, I take pretty seriously Paul's injunction to pray without ceasing that is to be in a continual attitude of prayer. So, I don't see myself disconnecting from God when I close the book. I don't want it to be... My Bible's are not underlined and marked up! I want to open them, and read them, as though it was for the first time. Okay? So these are some of Carlo's fetishes, whatever, you know, and that's why I appreciate what we're doing here and but yeah, I'm not a perfunctory type of person.

**Member:** In defense of these daily devotions (**Laughter**) Martha has brought one home called Jesus Calling and the underlying theme in there is to just start your day with the Lord. Um, it's just been, even though it's just a few paragraphs, it's a, been helpful...

**Member:** I tried to get into uh, what's his name? Oswald, uh. Chambers. That little book of his, and I just couldn't do it.

**Member:** So maybe the right book is the thing you're talking about.

**Member:** Well this one is as though Jesus is talking to you. It's written that way, so Jesus is the one speaking to you, I've found it very helpful, and then I try and read my bible. Because I think that one of our challenges is reading what other people say about the bible, and not reading the bible.

**Member:** Yes Sir.

**Emily:** That's very true.

**Member:** That's what I've appreciated about this group. It was a big attractor to me, just reading through the Scriptures.

**Emily:** And on a side note about Jesus calling, that happens to be my favorite, and what I think is the difference about it, is that it's written as Jesus talking, so it automatically personalizes it. Whereas another devotional book, I just read their thoughts about it just like I could read Scriptures without personalizing it. And so Jesus Calling automatically personalizes that Jesus is talking to me. So I think that makes it feel less impersonal.

Any other thoughts that you see, that keep people from studying Scripture?

**Member:** Time. You got to get to your meetings, you just don't take that time.

**Member:** What do you think about these people who wake up, they feel like God wakes them up, at some wee hour of the morning, and they feel like this is... He's calling me to study. I don't know about that. I just think I would fall asleep.

**Member:** I remember doing that. Setting the alarm and getting up early, and I usually fell asleep with my bible open.

**Member:** Oh I do that so I can fall asleep. (Laughter) If I want to sleep, if I really actually finally want to go to sleep, I just start reading.

**Member:** Well I've had many a week of prayer with Blake Morris, Morrie Venden, talking about that kind of engagement with the Scriptures, it doesn't work for me. I got to be out of bed, face washed, shaved, dressed, breakfast, wake up about 10 o'clock in the morning, then I can do this.

**Member:** Right, right, right. There's not a "one-size fits all" market here, and I think you said it really well when you said there's the urgent and the important. It's good.

(other conversation)

**Emily:** So next question... Out of the Scripture methods we covered, and I'll review them, with you, um which were the most meaningful to you and why? Um, the first week, we kind of generally talked about the principles of study for information versus study for relationship, and we went over the SOAP method? Scripture, Observation, Application, and Prayer, um just a general foundational way to look at Scripture and apply it to your own life. Um, the second week we talked about narrative, putting yourself into the story, maybe becoming a character, um, imagining, using your imagination to feel, to smell, to sense whatever they were sensing in the story, to look at it from the character's standpoint. Um, then we did theological, that you can take theological concepts or ideas in Scripture, and still study in them in a personal way to meet Jesus, not just gain information. And um, I can't remember which theological idea we all did together, but uh, the whole book of the bible. We took Philippians, um, praying Scripture, praying the prayers of Scripture, I think is the first one that we did, and then I think we did praying the promises of Scripture, those were two separate weeks, and then we did uh, memorizing, we did one week that I think was titled, hiding God's worked in your heart, where it covered things like memorizing Scripture, listening to Scripture, singing Scripture...

**Member:** That's when you introduced some of us to that online dramatization of reading of Scripture?

**Emily:** Yes. So those were the weeks, and different methods of reflecting on Scripture, so back to the question, what Scripture method was the most meaningful to you and why?

**Member:** Well, I liked the narrative where you could put yourself in the story. Very effective.

**Emily:** Why?

**Member:** Because I have to engage with it in order for it to help me. Sabbath, I mean it was, I tuned out Dave Thomas, and started reading 2<sup>nd</sup> Corinthians 11, found where he was, where he was preaching from, and suddenly I was Paul, and I was trying to read it as though I was talking to those people.

**Emily:** So it makes it come alive?

**Member:** Mhmm!

**Member:** To do that, you probably have to have a better understanding of the historical background, I would think. About what Paul is trying to say.

**Member:** But the New International Translation, there's a few that's finally what he resorted to, and it all became very clear immediately.

**Emily:** Hm. So anybody else? A Scripture method that we talked about that was meaningful, and why?

**Member:** I've always appreciated the ones with songs, especially if it has words to it.

**Member:** I was kind of moved when you just took like one verse, like, this was right at the beginning with Jesus and the Bible, and we just did one verse and just read that and thought about it, and that was really meaningful to me. Just taking a little bit and just thinking about that little bit, and not having to go for quantity.

**Emily:** Quality versus quantity then you're saying?

(Someone else spoke, but the microphone wasn't working well and it is really hard to hear.)

**Emily:** Any other?

**Member:**

The shorter books of the bible, and I like reading through them, I'm not very good at picking out outline a book very well... (Difficult to hear the rest)

**Member:** I also like just reading different versions. Some of them click a lot better than others.

**Emily:** And I'll find different times of my life; different versions speak to me more than others. Like during the time of our group, I was really into The Message, but right now I'm spending most of my time in the NIV, so it varies a lot.

**Member:** I'm really enjoying the amplified bible.

**Emily:** Any other thoughts or comments on that question about studying Scripture?

**Member:** I like the one where we can draw something... (difficult to hear the rest)

**Emily:** Artistic Reflection. Um, what was the most meaningful aspect of this small group, if there was a meaningful aspect, of this small group to you and why, so it could either be content or the experience. If you related to either, or word format, or what we did together. So what was meaningful about this small group personally in your life.

**Member:** Getting to know people outside of the church foyer. You know just a whole different setting.

**Member:** Also, our bit of commonalities that we do realize that we have, no matter age, career, or pathway, we all struggle with the same things.

**Member:** That's nice.

**Member:** Yeah. Yeah I think the community is really important in all of this. Like the early Christians meeting together in homes, and were together so much, I personally don't do that. And so when I get a chance to do that, it's really a treat.

**Member:** Even at a big potluck at church, there are so many other people around, it's hard to have meaningful conversation, to have deep conversation.

**Member:** The church is less anonymous to me. Now I see Helen in church, and I go ooh!

**Member:** Well it's been fun for me to get acquainted with you two, because I know your husband in his office at the hospital on a surgery table. My wife was on the table.

**Member:** They're pretty nice actually!

**Member:** Well actually it's pretty important what you do. And for me to come in here and run into Carolyn again, is a real treat. But Helen...goes way back for me too. That was nice too.

**Member:** Can she not come?

**Emily:** She was supposed to come, but had a last minute emergency meeting at some board she's on, so she was sad not to be here.

**Member:** I always thought that Marty always had good comments

**Emily:** Yeah, and he said he was going to come tonight. I guess he couldn't make it. So it sounds like, a general answer of what is valuable about this small group or maybe any small group is the community that it provides. The fellowship that it provides. Especially in a large church.

**Member:** Sharing insight too, that brought out things that don't even enter my mind and in Sabbath school, I listen to Marty talking, and I mean, where do you come up with those things? I read the same stuff and how, I mean, we think of such different thoughts about it. It's nice to hear them.

**Member:** But I think, Emily, too, I mean it isn't just us all being in the same space, I mean you must have done some sort of stimulating you know and questions or something, because we wouldn't just sit here and come up with great stuff, I mean, you had some sort of stimulus. I'm sorry.

**Emily:** Well, I think you might've.

**Member:** Well, no I think there was the leadership that enabled that, and so we were able to learn from each other, because of your leadership.

**Emily:** (Chuckle) Thank you. Oh, you're funny. Um, alright, anything else you wanna say to that? Um, during the course of the small group, um, and this is maybe a little bit more personal, so share what you feel comfortable, but during the course of our time together for those 8 weeks, did your personal relationship with God grow? Um, did the small group help you in any way with your personal time with God? So how?

**Member:** This is going to sound awful: No, it did not grow (chuckle) In the sense that there was some serious weakness that was finally overcome. No, it was just a reaffirmation for me of some old commitments that had just gotten rusty and tired, and neglected. So in that sense yes, but...

**Emily:** And I would call that growth, and maybe I should have used the word "strengthened." Because I would call that...

**Member:** It's like putting fuel in the tank.

**Member:** Sure, sure, sure, sure.

**Member:** It's like a plant that's growing, and you just got a little more watering, a little bit more fertilizing.

**Member:** There ya go!

**Emily:** And to say no, is an inappropriate answer. So feel free to say no.

**Member:** Yeah, hearing the question the way I did, the answer is no, but, all these other things... the plant needed watering.

**Member:** Maybe for me, it was, sometimes on the ones that I didn't relate to as much, it was more like homework, than strengthening a relationship, but the others, yes.

**Member:** Yeah actually, that part was very beneficial. And in secondly, Karen's conflict, uh, Emily, um. Handouts and the forethought, you've obviously done this before. This

wasn't just cold, once-through, um, it, the guidance was very, very effective. Kept us on track, learning! I felt like I had to be engaged to keep up!

**Member:** Yeah, the handouts were well thought out. That was not a "slapped together" job.

**Member:** That's right.

**Member:** I appreciated that.

**Emily:** Um, any other comments on if or how this may have helped strengthen your time with God.

**Member:** Well, one thing that it didn't do for me, and this is an ongoing problem, is trying to be consistent. To do things like this on a daily basis is challenging. But, I like her idea. Even though you don't do it, (Difficult to hear what was being said).

**Member:** And I think that, it's really, really true, how much we love Jesus is how much we may want to meet with him, or hear him through the Scriptures. So, if we're really wanting to meet with him, or know him, or want to study more of him, we'll get more.

**Emily:** So it's a circle, knowing him makes you want to spend time with him?

**Member:** Well it's just like knowing you, I mean, if I wanna know how you're doing, I'll text you or communicate you. ...But, I know you, and if we know Jesus... Hard to hear.

**Emily:** Next question. Um, so I just asked if it helped strengthen your relationship um with God um. Yes okay, so next question. Have you found that spending time with God in Scripture during the course of the small group impacted you in any way, which I think we pretty much answered that was a sidebar to that question. So the next one is, did it impact your relationship with others in any way, so how? What are your feelings about your relationship... So, did being a part of this small group impact your relationship with others?

**Member:** In the small group. Not outside the small group, but inside the group.

**Emily:** How so?

**Member:** How so? Well, I was sitting in church one Sabbath, and I felt a little finger on my shoulder, and I turned around, and it was Martha! And she had never done that before! (Laughter)

**Member:** So she was bugging her. (Laughter)

**Member:** And that was nice, and I have been wanting to know Martha better for a long time, and I am getting to know Martha better, and I've wanted that.

**Member:** And now we work at Sonbridge together too!

**Member:** Well, I didn't really achieve my attitude toward church, but I can see that it's kind of a general question for a general audience, I'm sure that people would be delighted to come to a small group because they don't feel intimidated by it as much. Perhaps intimidated, or "lost in the crowd", although I'm sure that some folks attend church to get "lost in the crowd." I suppose. And wouldn't come to a small group, they'd be too exposed, it works both ways. But, uh. (hard to hear) Did it enhance my view of church? Well, maybe of this church. Glad we're doing it!

**Member:** For me, I'm much more open to talk in smaller groups, but I probably wouldn't say okay if it was much bigger.

**Emily:** Was being in a small group an effective way to encourage way, or teach you to spend time in Scripture: why or why not? So in that question, it's asking, I'm asking if this small group, when we talk about teaching people to spend time in Scripture, the ways

we can do it. We can have retreats, we can have sermons on spending time in Scripture, seminars on spending time in Scripture, small groups on spending time in Scripture, Um, all of these different methods, was the small group setting and method an effective way to teach you to spend time in Scripture. Why, or why not?

**Member:** (Difficult to hear) But it structures you with homework.

**Member:** You can't intelligently comment on the assignment if you haven't done it.

**Member:** That's right. But it's they are illustrated assignments, and we practiced for one, and they were terrific assignments.

**Member:** I think it's more effective than a sermon, you bet. Obviously you go into much more detail over a period of 8 weeks, rather than just one sermon. Or even a series of them. And getting to practice it better, than just hearing it.

(more conversation but difficult to hear)

**Member:** You know if you have something to share, then you're going to kind of be on the spot. You can't even be... You can be conspicuous by not speaking up, when everybody else does.

**Emily:** One thing that I think a small group offers is accountability. Kinda like, why I like going to an exercise class, rather than having to schedule it on my own, because there's a group of people, and it starts at a certain time, and... you know...

**Member:** They expect you to be there.

**Emily:**

I think there's a fine line there. So there's an accountability aspect to it, but then the accountability not being so \_\_\_ so that you don't come. And you can be honest about it. And I didn't do it this week, but I really am glad to be here with you all. (laughter) So, I think that there's a fine line somewhere in there. Um, anybody else have anything else to add?

**Emily:**

A follow up question to that would be um, might there be other ways to teach it, uh, to teach this many kind of Scripture, this reading for relationship concept. Uh, are there other ways to teach it outside the small group that you think would be effective?

**Member:** Dinner at a restaurant, one to one. Two people,

**Emily:** One on one?

**Member:** Yeah. Yeah! One on one!

**Member:** I'm trying to think of a way that I would be bored to tears, would be if someone tried to do this online. Like a "live lecture" or something like that.

**Emily:** Like an online seminar type?

**Member:** Yeah I would, that would not do it for me at all.

**Member:** Or a book on tape, or a CD, that would be just too...

**Emily:** I like the one on one idea. Any others? Would you say that small group might be one of the more effective ways? Am I getting that consensus?

**Members:** Oh you bet. Yeah. Definitely.

**Emily:** Uh, alright here's another one that might require some honesty. So answer as you feel comfortable... Since the small group, have you applied to your personal time with God, anything that you learned during the course of this small group?

**Member:** Yes.

**Emily:** What?

**Member:** Um. Let's see. Well, that first Scripture: I am the vine, and you are the branches, and you have to stay connected, and you don't flourish unless you are connected. And so I have, I have just remembered that. And you just need to maintain the connection.

**Member:** Just this morning, that same verse was part of Jesus calling. And I thought, "oh that's a good tie up, just for tonight!"

**Emily:** Perfect, that's awesome! Anybody else? Have you applied any of the methods of studying Scripture, through the weeks, and if so, why?

**Member:** (difficult to hear what is being said)

**Member:** Yeah, that's right.

**Emily:** So it's changed your way of approaching it.

**Member:** It's just being aware of these other viewpoints, such as looking for promises, looking for prayers, paying attention to short phrases, or a text, a sentence. I have to work at that, because my inclination is to read the whole context, and sometimes I see myself wandering off to read the whole context, reading the several chapters before, or just pawing through, and before I know it, I've forgotten what it was that I was really starting to do. But yeah. Just being aware of these other points. Slow down and pay attention.

**Member:** I guess I realized that you can have real worship, with just one verse. Not even a whole chapter or a whole book.

**Member:** And I'm just the opposite of you, I underline. (laughter)

**Emily:** Me too. Different colors!

**Member:** Oh yeah... More pens and...

**Member:** (Laughing)

**Emily:** (laughing) I love finding a book, like I love a book that a loved one or someone I know well, has read and underlined. I love to have a book that is pre-underlined, because then it's like I get a window into their soul, about what was important to them at that point in time. I love that.

**Member:** Well at SonBridge, we get you know, some estates of people's books and all. See and like for instance we got the Klein's. Dr. and Mrs. Klein. They gave us their library. And almost every Ellen White book is underlined. Like perfectly with a ruler, and I still put them out for sale because, I'm sure that someone will treasure that. Especially if they know who owned it.

**Emily:** So any other comments, about something that you have applied? Um, what else would you have liked to have included in the small group. Either experience or content. So either of those categories.

(Other Conversation, difficult to understand it all)

**Emily:** Um, was 8 weeks too long? Or too short?

**Member:** I'd say it was too short. I thought we were just going good.

**Emily:** So you would've liked to have kept going?

**Member:** Yeah? I think maybe 3 or 4 weeks more...

**Member:** For a lifetime. (Laughter) It's the kind of thing that the fellowship builds the content into something that will maybe last a lifetime.

**Member:** Yeah we could've morphed into reading a book together, or wouldn't have to strictly read the bible. The focus is reading Scripture, but if it's a small group that stayed together, you could have morphed into some other kind of activity.



**Member:** Or maybe you could do it like for a quarter, with this “morphed” system. Like, you know, first do the relationship thing, and then I don’t know, what to morph into, but then some morphing.

**Member:** That’s a good idea. Doing the whole quarter.

**Member:** Well I like things to have boundaries, so. I liked knowing that it was 8 weeks, and then we were done...

**Member:** But if it was to continue, maybe have a break, and then start again with someone else.

**Member:** ...But to have it every week, I don’t want to commit to that. Mhmm.

**Emily:** Um, so along the lines of the last question, what could’ve been done to improve the small group?

**Member:** Well given, the target that was laid out for us, I think it was a very effective small group program.

**Emily:** Anybody else?

**Member:** No suggestions.

**Emily:** It won’t hurt my feelings, I promise!

**Member:** (difficult to hear, but resulted in laughter.)

**Member:** That would be a reason to take a break, and start up again. Instead of meeting every week, maybe meet every other week.

**Member:** Oh, I don’t like every other week.

**Member:** You don’t?

**Member:** No, uh uh, no. It’s too much of a break. I can see taking a break after 8 weeks, but every other week, I don’t really care for that.

**Emily:** I think, ideally, the way I was thinking, was that this would be something that would continue consistently for 8 weeks, and then maybe have a couple week break, and then start up again, and then at that point you could choose to sign up for another 8 weeks, or not. It gives a boundary for people to feel like, okay I’m done with that part of the commitment. And they choose whether they want to sign up again. Um, would you join another group like this. Why, or why not? In the future. Would you...

**Member:** Yes.

**Member:** Like being on the same topic, or structured like this one was?

**Emily:** Either

**Member:** Yes.

**Emily:** Yes, to both of those, or only one?

**Member:** Um, I guess I’d want a different topic, but structured like this. Something that we’re agreeing to work on together, and then share at the next session.

**Member:**

In fact, you would even be invited to my home, Emily, to lead a group in my house! (laughter)

**Emily:** We’ll talk. Um, would you recommend joining a small group to a friend. These are yes or no questions, but I’d like you to elaborate.

**Member:** Yes, the comradery that you build is long lasting, and bridging into more of a church family.

**Member:** Yes, I think it promotes Christian growth.

**Emily:** How so?

**Member:** Christian love. You can share Christian love with this group.

**Member:** You understand the troubles that are going on in other people's love, and can be praying for them, and it helps you understand them.

**Member:** It's about connection. (difficult to hear all of this) Part of us, part of each other.

**Emily:** You're now connected. Would you feel comfortable, why or why not, sharing something that you've learned in this group with someone else... That's unanimous nodding. (Laughter) Well good, that's good. Um, and then, this question is not because I plan on coercing you after this to do this. But after attending a small group, would you ever feel comfortable leading a small group?

**Member:** No. (much laughter)

**Member:** And we're encouraging some here to do that.

**Emily:** This is not because I'm going to be calling you, or extending the call (laughter).

**Member:** I would open my home, but I wouldn't be the leader.

**Emily:** So you wouldn't be the leader, but you'd open your home.

**Member:** Because I'm not capable.

**Emily:** Oh I think you're capable, comfortable, maybe not, but capable I think you are.

**Member:** There are lots of reasons I wouldn't do it (laughter)

**Emily:** Now, and you said yes, you'd feel comfortable leading a small group? (Speaking to a member who affirmed they would lead)

**Member:** Yes.

**Member:** You've lead a small group before, I would imagine.

**Member:** In various form, sure...

**Member:** Yeah, he's lead classrooms here and there.

**Member:** Sort of a small group.

**Member:** Yeah it's a small group, just a different kind.

**Member:** Well, lecture is not the same thing as a small group. But, you know, we instituted a form of breakout session.

**Member:** (Someone else says something, but very difficult to hear)

**Emily:** Anybody else?

**Member:** Yes. And it was good, it was good, and I heard Martha kind of open up and sharing, and I thought it was very interesting. It was about Mary and Martha, and this Martha shared how she really was a Martha in her soul, and how she kind of had to fight that, and I just found that very interesting, and I, well, you know, the personal sharing was good.

**Member:** I'm used to working around people who are sleeping. (So much laughter.) I went up front of the church to give like a two-minute story, and my heart was pounding, and my means were shaking, I could hardly speak. A physiological action that I have no control over.

**Member:** And you have a son named, Scott? Is that your son?

**Member:** My son? No, Alan.

**Member:** Oh Alan. Is that your son? (laughter)

**Member:** He has genes that are not from me. Yeah. Alan and Adam good up in front. Aaron, our middle son doesn't like that as much.

**Emily:** Well any other comments that you'd like to add about small group experience, that you may have wanted to add, but didn't get a chance to say?

**Member:** I really began to love this small group... (Impossible to hear.)

**Emily:** Thank you very much!

## Interview with Kandyce

September 22, 2016, with follow-up questions September 28, 2016

**Emily:** So tell me a little bit about why you choose led groups based on the material from the reflecting on Scripture group? What about your experience led you to do this?

**Kandyce:** It was an easy format to follow and use. I liked the creative aspect of this study

**Emily:** Tell me about the first group you led? Who attended? How many attended? What was the length of this group, time of each session for how many weeks/months?

**Kandyce:** The first group I led was Walla Walla University freshman girls.

Approximately, 5 attended each week. We met weekly for 45 min to an hour. We met for seven weeks.

**Emily:** What was positive about the make up of this group? The gender? The number of attendees? The length of time? What could be improved?

**Kandyce:** Positive things from the make up of this group were there were fresh perspectives and students eager to be immersed in bible study. They chose to take time out of their busy college life to attend this meeting. 5 attended, 45min-1hr, Format or graphics of the handouts

**Emily:** (Follow up question) How did the number of people in the group and the all girl gender effect the dynamics of the group? Was it a good number to have participate? Did being all female help or disadvantage the group? Did the attendees quickly or slowly learn to open up and share with one another? (sorry that is a lot of follow up questions to my original questions)

**Kandyce:** The all-girl group was good it helped the group, felt more intimate as far as conversation. I think they felt safer sharing their ideas with each other, that was a benefit. I think limiting it to 5 or 6 is good so all people feel they can share and it doesn't affect time constraints. Because we had developed a relationship fall quarter it was easier for them to open up winter quarter when I hosted the group.

**Emily:** What were some positive results? Some things about the material and the groups that that went well? Essential elements? Positive results in the lives of the attendees?

**Kandyce:** Girls began to become attached to The Word, they became regular readers and studiers. It was amazing to see! It is essential to have a host who stays to the schedule and doesn't waste time. I think it is essential to have someone who has gone through the study before hosting it. Also essential, sharing time (sharing what we had gone over the previous week in our own Bible study time). I believe one of the girls directly made the decision to be a student missionary after taking the Bible study. She continued to do daily devotionals based on the SOAP method while she was overseas.

**Emily:** (Follow up question) And part/s of the group elements particularly meaningful?

**Kandyce:** I think sharing time. I did not do the prayer at the end in the same way you did. I couldn't remember all the different prayer things you did, that might be nice to include as a piece in the bible study outlines.

**Emily:** Tell me about the second group you led? Who attended? How many attended? What was the length of this group, time of each session for how many weeks/months?

**Kandyce:** The second group I led was a few married couples of SDA background. I believe there were three couples. This group took a little longer. Anywhere from 1hr-

1.5hr and we went for 7 weeks.

**Emily:** What was positive about the make up of this second group? The gender? The number of attendees? The length of time? What could be improved?

**Kandyce:** It was an interesting shift, because most of couples had a little bit more experience with bible reading. The discussions were a little bit more rounded and more life experience was given in conjunction with the study. I think that we could have been a bit more strict with the time element. I like to stay to 45 min. for the study and leave 15 min for prayer time.

**Emily:** (Follow up question) Did the fact that the members were married add positives or negatives? What about it being mixed gender? What were the positives and negatives about that? Also, like I asked about the first group, how do you feel about the number of people that attended? Was this a good number?

**Kandyce:** The number of this group was good, it wasn't bad to have mixed genders it was just a different feel, less intimate more factual. I think both were equally valuable.

**Emily:** What were some positive results of the second group? Some things about the material and the groups that that went well? Essential elements? Positive results in the lives of the attendees?

**Kandyce:** Some positives... some of the adults had never experienced reading the bible in a different way after many years having studied the bible. It was exciting to see them look at things with a fresh perspective. Essential elements, the outline and organization of materials, sharing time (sharing what we had gone over the previous week in our own bible study time). I think positives were once again having people look at the bible in different ways. It gives a fresh perspective on bible study.

**Emily:** (Follow up question) Regarding the second group with the married couples, Was there any particular bible reading method/s that most resonated with the attendees? And part/s of the group schedule particularly meaningful (such as the opening sharing time, reading Scripture together, praying together, etc.)

**Kandyce:** Again, I think the sharing was the best part of the group time. That is what got people discussing things and sharing more.

**Emily:** How did you feel as a leader as you led people through this material? What was beneficial for you? The impact on you? What was challenging?

**Kandyce:** I felt really confident leading since I had been in the group with you as the previous leader. The outlined and organized material was essential. Every time I did the study I found myself discovering new things. It goes to show that The Word is LIVING! It was challenging when questions came up that I wasn't prepared to answer. Praying for wisdom (especially with the college students) was imperative. It was also sometimes challenging to keep the time managed. I think having suggested minutes on the outline of each week's page would be helpful for a leader (if the leader had never been through the series before).

**Emily:** What are your recommendations for the use of this material? Any other thoughts you think would be helpful to share?

**Kandyce:** I think this material should be spread widely to ALL age groups. I think it would be nice to have it designed with some modern touches to make it appealing to younger people and designed with some traditional touches to make it more applicable to more mature people. It could have a different feel for both ages. I think it could also be adapted for school age children. This bible study is SO very useful. I think you were

given amazing inspiration to create such a creative way to approach bible study!

**Additional Comments:**

**Kandyce adds:** A lot of the group attendees in both groups liked the SOAP method. I had another girl that really liked immersing herself in one book at a time. The one that was the ALL TIME favorite in both books was putting yourself in the story as a character (a personal favorite of mine too).

Note: Kandyce also says she is planning to run another group using the material this winter (2016) with her new female college mentees.

**Emily:** Are there any other ways, settings you could see this material used?

**Kandyce:** I could see a spiritual retreat being and AWESOME way to incorporate this material.

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## VITA

Name: Emily M. Whitney

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### **Education:**

- |           |   |
|-----------|---|
| 1999-2005 | Bachelor of Arts in Theology and Minor in Biblical Languages, Southern Adventist University, graduating Summa Cum Laude             |
| 2005-2008 | Masters of Divinity from the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary, Andrews University, emphasis in Youth Ministry             |
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- |      |   |
|------|---|
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|------|---|

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| 2015-Present | Associate Pastor for Discipleship at Summit Northwest Ministries            |
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